

Ripper

The image is a promotional poster for the TV series 'Ripper'. The title 'Ripper' is written in a large, ornate, metallic font at the top. The background is a dark, atmospheric Victorian street scene with a man in a top hat and a cane walking away in the distance. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair, wearing a red Victorian dress with a high collar and a brooch, looks directly at the camera. The overall tone is mysterious and gothic.

AMY CAROL REEVES

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One

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Damn.”

If the pickpocket had taken anything other than *that*, I could have let it go. But not Mother’s brooch. I had to keep that.

Grandmother, in front of me and already stepping into the coach, heard the curse and clucked her tongue. Richard, her long-time servant, held the carriage door open for me. His eyes widened in exasperation.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry,” I gasped to him and to Grandmother before running after the soot-streaked boy. This pickpocket was a slick one. Even as he ran from me, I saw him snatch a pocket watch from an unwary gentleman. I would not have noticed the thievery if it had not been for my years in Ireland where I had learned to pay attention to any and every feather-brush from passersby. The brooch had been an easy catch, exposed as I clutched Grandmother’s stack of new purchases—all the shiny boxes with hats and beaded gloves.

“Arabella! Arabella!”

Grandmother’s voice rang out from the open window of her carriage. I would get a tongue-lashing from her later: “*Seventeen-years-old, Arabella! And running through the streets!*”

While I ran, I thought of the many times I had disappointed Grandmother since coming to live with her two months before. I thought of all the behaviors that she deemed necessary, of all the etiquette that she deemed proper. I had tried to comply, but most of her rules seemed nonsensical and as enticing as rotten fruit.

Focus, Abbie.

Running against the crush of late afternoon Knightsbridge shoppers, I was having difficulty keeping up with the boy. My heart pounded in my chest. He dashed across the Sloane Street intersection, and a carriage narrowly missed colliding with him.

“Stop, *please* stop!”

The boy continued, unhindered by my shouts, even quickening his pace. I ran faster, catching up with him a bit as we approached the corner of Hyde Park. I nearly overtook him there. But then I collided with a cluster of schoolchildren, and I lost sight of him.

Dizzied, I stopped and scanned the scene around me. Like a bloom, evening’s pink flush spread rapidly across the sky. Children and dogs ran within the park boundaries. Shop owners closed their doors. The cacophony of city shouts and street noises seemed to ring out louder just as church bells everywhere chimed the five o’clock hour. When I was about to give up, I saw the boy again, running fast past the Wellington Arch and straight into Green Park.

He continued east.

“Stop!”

Shouting was futile, and I paused, telling myself that this chase was foolhardy and useless.

But I knew I would keep going, even against my better judgment. The brooch was a material connection to Mother, one of the few items of hers that I had left.

I had to get it back.

The chase continued, and I dashed after him into the park.

The path was damp from a recent rain shower, and as we neared Buckingham Palace, the boy fell. I almost caught him, but he was up and running again just as I was about to grab his jacket collar.

As we ran along the Strand, I stumbled twice—splashing mud upon my skirt. We ran down several more streets and rather than tiring, I began to feel renewed energy. I bolted after him, nearly catching him once again as we passed St. Paul’s Cathedral, but then, I almost lost him among the cheesemongers’ stands within the Leadenhall Street Market.

With every passing block, we penetrated deeper into the East End.

I smelled the odor of the slaughterhouses. Crowds of barefoot children dashed in and out of workhouse alleys. Women, their mothers perhaps, positioned themselves under streetlamps for their nightly occupations.

At the base of a set of concrete steps, the boy suddenly stopped and turned around to face me. A large, worn brick building loomed behind him. A shiny, newly engraved sign that had been bolted neatly into the bricks caught my eye: *Whitechapel Hospital for Women. Est. 1883.*

I stopped, only a few yards away from the child.

“I have money for you,” I said quickly, worried that he might take off. “Four crowns. You can have them. That brooch is worth nothing. I only want it back because it belonged to my mother. She’s dead now.”

The child cocked his head, very serious about our exchange. He studied me from under his cap, and then I saw his gaze focus greedily on the coins on my palm. He wanted and needed the money. Now that I stood closer to him, I saw clearly his dirty, broken fingernails, that his cheekbones were too prominent for a boy in good health. I wondered what else he needed.

“Are you hungry?”

No reply. He was resolved to remain mute.

The sky darkened, and I knew I had to return home. It was a long way to Grandmother’s house in Kensington, and I worried that she might contact the police if she had not already.

“Here,” I said, taking one cautious step closer to the boy. “Drop the brooch, and I’ll toss the coins to you in this purse.”

I dropped the coins inside the purse and tightened the drawstring.

“Deal?”

He remained silent, but I saw agreement in his eyes; he dropped the brooch when I tossed the purse to him. As I stepped forward and stooped to pick the brooch up, I expected him to bolt down the street. Instead, he stood still, facing me.

Suddenly, I felt sucked into another place.

The boy, the brick building, the street, everything before me melted away. It was as if I had been sucked into a black cloud. Then some of the darkness dissipated, swirled away a bit as I envisioned burning candles. Torches. Dusky-

robed figures chanting something in a foreign tongue. I could see no faces, but I saw a chalice in the hands of one of the figures.

Then I found myself once again in the street facing the boy.

What had just happened?

The boy stood where he was, but a glassy, sharp look had taken over his eyes.

“Goodbye, dollygirl,” he said before running away.

My heart pounded; I reeled and then steadied myself. The vision, the flash of change that had come over the boy, shook my core.

Shouts from a nearby pub and a mangy pack of dogs running past reminded me that I had to return home, but I felt frightened and physically exhausted from the chase.

A very large wagon stacked with wooden boxes rode past me—west. I hopped onto the back end, my limbs still trembling violently from my experience.

Two

While walking up the front steps of Grandmother's grand house in Kensington, all of my alarm at the evening's events faded momentarily as I prepared to face her wrath.

I chewed my lip. Perhaps, like my mother, I could be a governess. After tonight, I could not imagine Grandmother allowing me to live with her any longer. She would almost certainly send me away. Light blazed from every window of her house, and I pictured the fury that seemed to burn Grandmother from the inside out whenever I embarrassed her. This evening would be the last straw.

Richard opened the door for me. Relief washed over his face, lightening briefly the deep folds upon his cheeks. "Miss Arabella is here, Madame!"

There came no reply from the parlor, where I knew Grandmother would be; instead, I heard only the cracking of the fire in that little room.

I smiled guiltily at Richard. He raised his graying eyebrows in an expression of amusement and chastisement and embarked upon a gentle tirade: "Miss Abbie, your grandmother is very ... *put out*. She has been waiting for you in great anxiety for the past several hours. She already has the police out looking for you. And you are most fortunate that Ellen has the evening off. Otherwise, you *know* the uproar she might have made about this."

Ellen, Grandmother's other servant, had a little of the hysteric in her.

Richard helped remove my coat. "And you missed dinner. I will have to see about reheating some bread and pork. But that will be *after* I alert the police that you are home. Safe."

At that moment, I saw my reflection in the entrance hall mirror. Not only had mud splattered upon my dress, but it had somehow become streaked down my cheeks. My hair flared out in wild red coils. I looked insane, like a madwoman—a bustle-clad Medusa.

“Thank you, Richard. And I am very sorry for the trouble I have caused for you. Please tell Grandmother that I’m going to go upstairs to make myself a little more presentable.”

“An *excellent* idea, Miss Abbie,” Richard said sharply. However, just before I turned to walk up the stairs, he caught my wrist. I grinned and, opening my fingers, showed him the brooch in my palm.

“*Triumphant*,” I whispered.

Richard smiled and shook his head.

After placing the brooch on my bedroom dresser, I began washing my face in the porcelain washbasin. I splashed my cheeks with the icy water and then, on a split-second urge, plunged my entire head into the bowl. The rush of water into my eyes, my nose, brought no stinging relief to me. So I surfaced. I stared at the brooch as I dried my hair and wondered if I was sane. The chase into the East End tonight had been foolish, and then the vision, and the child’s changed expression—that had seemed impossible. Perhaps I was losing my mind from my grief over Mother’s recent death. Her illness had been brief and terrible. I stifled a sob. Memories of her loomed like a giant prism distorting, even occluding, my thoughts.

The clock over the fireplace in my bedroom struck nine o’clock, and I knew that I would have to meet with Grandmother soon.

After changing my clothes, I walked downstairs to face her.



Grandmother sat near the heat of the parlor fire. Her back remained ramrod-straight while she stroked the belly of her pug, Jupe. In her hand, she held a small copy of Tennyson’s poems.

As she glared at me over her spectacles, I could see the proud forbearance that Mother must have endured before she eloped with my poor father. Grandmother

wore her gray hair pulled into a perfect geometric knot at the back of her head. Her side hair swooped neatly over her ears, though not low enough to cover the dangling pearl-drop earrings.

“Sit down, Arabella.” She gestured toward the cushioned chair facing her. She had lectured me many times in the past weeks. But this would be different. Something stony tinged her voice, and I knew that I would only have to wait a few minutes before hearing her banish me for good from her house.

She sat silently, laying her book in her lap beside Jupe and staring at me.

Overwhelmed by both shame and fury, I glanced sideways into the flames.

I half-hoped for Grandmother’s dismissal; I had done nothing, *felt* nothing significant since coming here. It had all been hours of embroidering, card parties, and tea. And I knew that all of this life was purposed toward one point only—my eventual marriage. Then it would all be the same dance in a different household.

But instead of decreeing an instant dismissal, she said nothing. I waited. Then, after she picked up her teacup and took a deep swallow: “You know, Arabella, that in these past two months, I have been trying to *save* you.”

“From what?”

“From *what*?” She set her teacup down with such force that the tea splashed up, spilling over the rim and onto the side table. “From *yourself*, Arabella Sharp, from your own naïvety, and ... from your past.”

“Save me?”

I began to feel incredulous as I realized what drove all of this. Grandmother was seeking atonement for her own sins. She had banished Mother nearly twenty years ago for eloping with my father, Jacque Sharp. This was a ferocious haunt to her now.

No, I thought disappointedly. *She is not going to send me away.*

I remembered facing Mother’s grave after her burial service, contemplating where I would go next. But then, in that Dublin graveyard, I had suddenly felt Grandmother’s hand, clawlike, upon my shoulder. Though I had never met Lady Charlotte Westfield, I instantly surmised her identity even under her full-mourning attire. Her aquiline nose protruded from under the dark crêpe veil; her

poise remained undaunted by the falling rains. This woman was the stepmother in all of the fairy tales Mother told to me, the Fury in every myth. And I left that very day with her, for my new life in London.

“Do you not understand the way things work?” Grandmother continued. “Your background is disgraceful. I have told everyone as little as possible about your mother’s life since she left me. Do you think I can tell anyone that she could barely make ends meet as a governess and that, after your father died, she moved you from town to town, always looking for some well-to-do family to pay her to give lessons to their young brats?”

“But it was *you*, Grandmother, who refused to communicate with Mother anymore after she married my father. It was *you* who cut her off from ... ”

“Enough!” Grandmother raised her hand to silence me. I saw that she trembled.

“I have *saved* you from a life of poverty. I have offered you a clean start, another chance. If we keep your background quiet, you might marry well, and you just might become respectable. But if you run through the streets as you did today, you will destroy everything that I am trying to do for you.”

Ingratitude. That was the other element to this lecture.

“You, Arabella, are completely ignorant of the way you must act in London. I do not even *want* to know where you ran to this evening. In fact, never tell me. But it was *dangerous* not only to your life, but to your reputation—which you must work harder than most to solidify. If anyone saw you ... ”

I began to feel suffocated, annoyed, and this did not go unmissed by Grandmother.

She glared at me pointedly, “I have been debating whether or not to allow you to do something. But I am convinced that your blatant ingratitude and your unwillingness to display the dignity of your class demands that I permit it.”

Jupe leapt off her lap, running from the room and the rising tensions.

“A longtime acquaintance of our family and a well-respected physician and surgeon, Dr. Julian Bartlett, has offered to give you a *moral* education of sorts. He has proposed that you be allowed to work with him in the charity hospital he founded. It is a place of refuge for women in trouble. Whitechapel Hospital, I believe it is called.”

My heart thumped louder—the *place where my chase with the boy had taken me!*

“Dr. Bartlett wrote to me a few weeks ago, offering the opportunity for you. At first, I thought it out of the question. That area is unredeemable. For you to be in that hospital, caring for *those* women ... pitiful though they are.”

“*Prostitutes*, you mean? Most of the patients are prostitutes.”

Grandmother’s face sharpened. “Yes, Arabella. Therefore, you understand why I was completely opposed to the idea. But then, earlier this week, he wrote again, and Dr. Bartlett can be extremely persuasive. Furthermore, Violet and Catherine, when I brought up the issue at tea the other day, thought I should consider the prospect. They said that it is quite vogue for young women to do some charitable service for a period—even in such a district. They thought that it would, in fact, be good for your character.”

For once, I appreciated Grandmother’s two Kensington neighbors. Lady Violet and Lady Catherine came to her house nearly every week for tea and cribbage. Their opinions weighed heavily with Grandmother, particularly their opinions regarding what was “vogue.”

My heavy thoughts slid away a bit when I considered the prospect of *doing* something. Ever since arriving at Grandmother’s house, I had felt entrapped within a glass globe. Though I could see the world outside, I had been forbidden from venturing beyond the too-solid walls. The barefoot children I had seen today reminded me of the outer world, and a need surged inside me to become active.

“The work, of course, will be extraordinarily *distasteful*. In fact, the work will be quite foul.”

“When am I to begin?”

“Dr. Bartlett wrote that you may begin whenever you wish.” Her tone indicated to me that my reaction was not what she had desired. “I am requiring that you work there for one week. After that, you may decide whether you want to continue or not. My hope is that you will see how fortunate you are, and what I have saved you from—poverty, possible destitution. With me, you can have leisure and the opportunity to cultivate all the graces that will help you run your own household someday.”

Grandmother stared at me, hawklike. I could already tell that she questioned whether this opportunity would have the desired effects upon my character.

“For once Arabella, you must follow my rules. You will not be allowed to enter or leave the hospital except in Dr. Bartlett’s carriage—which he has assured me that he will provide for you. Please obey me. I insist upon it.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

When it was time to go to bed, I kissed her forehead. As I bent over her, I smelled the lavender powder on her skin; her eyes hooked into my own, and I knew that I only poorly concealed my excitement about beginning work at the hospital.

Three

Only two days later, Dr. Bartlett's carriage delivered me to the steps of Whitechapel Hospital for my first day of work. The building itself was old, sprawling, and yet puzzlingly solid, seemingly uncorrupted by the surrounding factories and traffic, by the mid-morning shouts of vendors and drunken East Enders. It stood as a symbol of order amidst all the busy slapdash of the streets.

But there was nothing orderly in the immediate interior of the hospital. The moment I entered the front doors, I felt almost overwhelmed by a blanket of odors—feces, ammonia, urine, acidic smells I could not identify—that descended upon me. The enormous first floor ward was positioned only a few feet away from where I stood. Children, some mere toddlers, ran throughout the ward. Pregnant women and women breastfeeding infants lay in beds only a few feet apart. Nurses, clothed in blue dresses and dirty pinafores, hurried about shouting at the children and attending to the women in the beds.

To my right, a narrow and grimy set of stairs twisted so sharply upward that I could not see the second floor landing. A stout nurse clothed like the others (with the exception that she wore an enormous crucifix around her neck) stormed down these stairs. She looked stressed, even angry, when she saw me.

“Miss Arabella Sharp?”

“Abbie, please.”

I heard footsteps descending the stairs behind her.

“The Sharp girl is here, Dr. Bartlett!” the nurse shouted over her shoulder.

Dr. Julian Bartlett was like no one I had ever seen before. He had an expression of detached nobility, reminding me of the illustrations of antique

busts in Mother's history books. With his white hair and trim beard, Dr. Bartlett could not have been less than sixty years of age, but his posture had no stoop, and his bearing was that of a much younger man. In one brief instant, he considered me with a blue-eyed gaze that was kind, cool, and penetrating all at once.

"Ah, Miss Sharp! It is wonderful that you have arrived."

His voice made me think of silk. Of pearls.

"Shall I find her something appropriate to wear?" The nurse stared rudely at the dark dress I wore, borrowed from Ellen that morning.

"Yes, of course, Sister Josephine."

When she left, Dr. Bartlett greeted me and inquired with perfect politeness about Grandmother's health and my adjustment to London.

"Let us walk up to my office. It is too difficult to talk amidst all this noise. I want to explain to you the business of the hospital, and, if you have no objections, I would like for you to shadow me today. Acceptable?"

"Perfectly." My chest tightened in both trepidation and excitement.

Dr. Bartlett led me up the stairs. Though not particularly tall, he possessed a towering poise, steely confidence, capability. I doubted that he faltered much in anything.

"On the first floor, we keep the pregnant and postpartum women. The delivery area and nursery are at the back of that ward. We have a delivery nearly every day here, several deliveries on most days."

"Where do the children on that floor stay?"

"Unfortunately, nowhere particular. At night, they sleep in their mothers' beds or on any makeshift beds the nurses can locate. This is, of course, not at all an ideal situation, but they do not have anywhere else to go while their mothers are under our care. I would like to build onto that ward, to create some sort of children's room, perhaps even a small school for them."

"When do you think that might be possible?"

We stepped aside for a nurse carrying a chamber pot down the stairs.

"I have not the faintest idea. Money is always an issue here." Dr. Bartlett glanced sideways at me. "The Whitechapel district is not a great priority to many."

Mother, in all of her descriptions of London—of the museums, Buckingham Palace, the main parks—had not failed to tell me about the East End. “Forgotten,” she had called it once, and I knew that her empathy for the district was more than the “vogue” and flighty sympathies endorsed by Grandmother and her friends.

When we reached the landing of the second floor, the atmosphere seemed quieter, not nearly as chaotic as the first floor ward. Dr. Bartlett explained that the women on the second and third floors were all patients admitted for reasons other than pregnancy care or childbirth. A middle-aged female patient reclining in a bed locked eyes with me as Dr. Bartlett and I continued up the steps. She wore a hospital gown, no better than a pinned sheet, and her gritty dark hair was pulled up on the top of her head and held in place by a broken tiara. I wondered what misfortunes had brought her here.

“Venereal diseases,” Dr. Bartlett said quietly, as if he had read my mind. “On the second floor, most patients are being treated for venereal diseases and drinking ailments. Nearly every prostitute in this district is afflicted by both.”

“So most on that floor are prostitutes?”

“Yes, entirely on that floor, and many, indeed most, in the first floor ward.”

I appreciated his candor about the patients and their conditions, and I had a growing sense that Dr. Bartlett would treat me as a colleague. I had feared that, as the granddaughter of Lady Westfield, I would be shielded from the actualities of Whitechapel Hospital.

The fourth floor had no wards, only a laboratory and two offices: Dr. Bartlett’s office, and the office of the other founder of Whitechapel Hospital, Dr. Robert Buck. According to Dr. Bartlett, Dr. Buck was more scientist than medical doctor and spent much of his time in the laboratory, pursuing his research alongside medical students and other physicians.

“So you have medical students here?” I asked him when we were seated in his office.

“Yes, a few.” From behind his desk, Dr. Bartlett lit a pipe. The sweet smell soon filled the air. I had expected a grander place for him, but his office was cramped—a single bookcase covered almost an entire wall, and there was only one window. Perched on a small stand behind him was a human skull; pen

scratches and notes had been drawn about the cranium.

Dr. Bartlett tapped some of his pipe ash into a little dish. “Most universities are still deficient in educating medical students on surgical procedures, emphasizing mainly theoretical knowledge. I like to provide medical students and new physicians with the opportunity to gain experience in surgeries and deliveries.”

He eyed me curiously. “And there is no hierarchy between myself and the other physicians. Feel free to inquire of them if you have difficulties arise.”

“Are you not here always?”

A *foolish question*—of course he would not spend all of his hours at that hospital. But I felt a stupid panic at the thought of working alone with those angry, overworked nurses on the first floor.

“Mostly, but I do lecture some terms at Oxford. And there are always conferences.”

“Of course.”

As he continued smoking the pipe, he stared at me. It was a distracted stare, as if he did not see me at all, and yet I felt penetrated. I became transfixed, and the fibers of my muscles seemed to quiver a little. The sensation did not hurt, yet I felt a rising defensive urge to fight or to run. But I could name no real danger in Dr. Bartlett’s office.

Sister Josephine’s appearance in the doorway broke the spell. Agitated and flushed very red, she thrust a nurse’s uniform into my arms without giving me a single glance.

“We are about to have a delivery,” she snapped. “And it’s a breech. Dr. Siddal is already there trying to turn the child.”

Calmly, Dr. Bartlett set aside his pipe and stood, tall behind the desk. “I’ll be there momentarily.” He paused, “We’ll try to turn the baby, but if I cannot ... we might have to perform a caesarian.”

Sister Josephine’s forehead tensed.

“But ... ”

“It might be *necessary*. And best.”

She said nothing more, but left, almost running down the hall.

Dr. Bartlett began rolling up his sleeves, revealing surprisingly muscled arms

for his age. “You are welcome to come, Abbie. Though I understand if you choose not to.”

It seemed unthinkable to not attend the delivery.

“I’ll be there.”



The moment I had changed into the nurse’s uniform, I returned to the first floor. I rushed toward Dr. Bartlett, who stood with Josephine at the back of the ward just outside the curtained area.

A scream sounded from behind the curtain as I approached. Dread rose within me.

My heart twisted upon itself when a young man stepped out from behind the curtain, nearly colliding with me. He was not any more than twenty-three or twenty-four, and remarkably handsome; his brown eyes shone shrewdly under his unruly dark hair. Something in his expression, a sort of craggy self-assurance, stirred and shocked me like a plunge into an icy pool of water. The shock was such that I gasped.

He locked eyes with me for a second. I felt a hot blush upon my cheeks and hoped that my rush of feelings had not been too transparent.

“Abbie, meet Dr. William Siddal,” Dr. Bartlett said quickly. “William, Lady Westfield’s granddaughter, Arabella Sharp.”

William cast me a small nod, but otherwise barely considered me. Like Dr. Bartlett, his sleeves were rolled to the elbows. Water soaked his shirt. Blood smudged his arms.

“Any progress, William?” Dr. Bartlett asked.

“None at all.”

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight of the patient. She was young, no more than fifteen. Propped upward on the delivery table, her legs were spread wide underneath a sheet, her raggedy dress cut up to her chest. Water soaked the sheets. Her hair had been entirely slicked away from her forehead by sweat. The girl’s face, disfigured by smallpox scars and impossibly pale, had an almost inhuman appearance.

She emitted only short sharp gasps now—gasps sounding more terrible than the earlier scream.

“She was brought in an hour ago, her water already broken,” William explained, standing at the bottom of the bed. “I found immediately that it was a breech. I have not been able to turn the child, and a breech delivery is out of the question. Her pelvic bones are too narrow, I believe, to allow even a normal delivery.”

Flushed and perspiring, William moved aside for Dr. Bartlett.

Dr. Bartlett’s face remained marble-smooth as he bent to turn the girl’s baby. Before reaching inside of her, he addressed her gently. “Sweet child.” She rolled her eyeballs—red with broken vessels—downward toward him. The gasping ceased a little.

“You are going to be fine,” he said to her. “You will have a few minutes of discomfort, even some pain, but everything will be fine.”

He turned to me. “Abbie, please sponge her forehead.” He nodded toward a basin of water and a cloth nearby.

“William”—Dr. Bartlett’s hand was still inside the girl as he spoke—“please try to manipulate the fetus from the outside.”

She cried out in pain.

While I sponged the girl’s forehead, Dr. Bartlett tried to turn the child. William pressed on various parts of the abdomen, all while observing Dr. Bartlett’s movements.

The girl screamed again, this time even more piercingly.

I continued to sponge her face.

“I hope you’re all right, Miss Sharp,” William said irritably, mockingly, though he did not even glance at me. “You can leave at any time.”

“I’m fine.” I felt annoyed, viscerally annoyed—annoyed with him for his arrogance, annoyed with myself for finding him so handsome. And I felt guilty. My feelings of annoyance and attraction for him felt unorthodox in this moment where all of my energies should have been focused on the girl.

Dr. Bartlett’s gaze remained focused. He seemed to have reached a decision. Calmly, he pulled his hand out of the girl and wiped it on a towel. “William, might I see you outside of the curtain for a moment?”

I was certain that the girl, nearly unconscious now from pain, could not hear them, but I could. They spoke in near whispers.

“We’re going to have to do a caesarean, William.”

“I agree.”

“I am going to let you do it—the horizontal cut, *not* the vertical one, remember?”

Through the thin curtain, I could see their profiles. William shook his head vigorously.

“She’s probably going to die. But if *I* do it, she’ll certainly die. I have never done one before.”

“You must try at some point. I’ll guide you through it.”

A long pause.

“All right, *all right*.”

I stared at the girl’s face under my own. She trembled, and her eyes bulged before she resumed the violent gasping. I had never considered that she would die. I pitied her as I wondered what her story had been, who the father of her child was, how forsaken she was, and if anyone missed her now.

William stepped inside the curtain again. Josephine had left with Dr. Bartlett to find supplies and other attending nurses, and we were now alone with the girl.

With fearsome intensity, William ran his hand through his sweat-soaked curls and contemplated the girl. Then, in a single movement, he pulled the sheet that was across her legs away and cut off the rest of her dress.

At that point, Dr. Bartlett, Josephine, and two other nurses returned.

The nurses carried a tray upon which rested several instruments: scalpels, a small thin knife, scissors, many other instruments that I did not recognize, several lengths of dressing, large needles, heavy thread, and jars of liquid, including a jar of iodine and one of carbolic acid.

“We are going to have to cut your baby out,” Dr. Bartlett said quietly to the girl. “My nurse will give you some medicine and you will not feel pain. Everything will be all right in the end.”

He patted her shoulder.

At this point, even Dr. Bartlett could not calm her. In what was nothing less than a miraculous burst of energy, she began screaming, “I’m ’bout to die! I’m

'bout to die!" She grabbed at me violently.

"Hush! Hold her *still* !" William shouted to me and one of the attending nurses. I frowned at him, although he was too focused to notice. Such an explosion would only escalate the girl's hysteria.

After Josephine rushed forward to administer the ether, the girl fell asleep almost immediately.

William waited until a nurse had disinfected the girl's abdomen and then moved the scalpel lightly across her pelvic region, deciding the proper place to cut.

"That's fine," Dr. Bartlett whispered from where he stood behind William. "*There.*" William had placed the scalpel on one section of the girl's lower pelvic region.

A thin red line of blood followed William's cut. I looked away then, not wanting to see the layers of fat and intestines that would be exposed.

After what seemed like several minutes, I heard a squeal.

"Perfect. A baby girl!" Dr. Bartlett exclaimed as William severed the umbilical cord.

Josephine efficiently whisked away the bloody, screaming infant.

I had never witnessed a birth and felt a little thrill at the delivery. Even William's mouth twitched a bit in the hint of a smile. I experienced a strange envy that he had been the one to bring that baby into the world.

But then his face darkened.

"*Damn!* " He stared at the girl's chalky face and then down at her incision.

I looked down and saw that the girl did not appear to be breathing.

"*Damn! Damn!* " William probed the incision wound with his finger.

"She's hemorrhaging," Dr. Bartlett responded quietly.

"From where?! Can we suture it?"

"By the time we find it, she will be gone." Dr. Bartlett felt the girl's pulse. "She's dying." He laid his hand on William's shoulder. "There is nothing that can be done."

I watched as life drained from the girl. Her breathing ceased, and then she became fearfully still.

William continued staring at the incision wound.

“This happens, William.”

The girl had been a stranger to me, but I felt a little of the familiar, brutal emptiness I had experienced when I had watched Mother die.

“Go home, and take the rest of the day off,” Dr. Bartlett gently commanded William. “Sleep. And if it has stopped raining, take a long walk.”

William did not say a word. Abruptly, he washed and dried his hands, snapped the curtain open, and stormed away from the delivery area.

Dr. Bartlett sighed, felt the girl’s pulse again, and then shut her eyelids.

I felt frozen, unable to move. My throat burned painful and parched as I stood near her head, clutching the sponge in my hand.

“Abbie, why don’t you go home, too? I am sorry that your first morning had to be so difficult. I understand if you do not wish to come back.”

“I do. If it’s all right, I would like to return tomorrow.” After what I had just witnessed, my immediate answer sounded strange even to me. But I also felt that it was the only possible answer.

Dr. Bartlett glanced up from the corpse to look at me, his expression unreadable.

“Certainly. But do please go home now. You have done enough for today.”

The nurses entered, and, after methodically covering the body with a sheet, they rolled away the bed.



The inside of the hospital had been so muggy that the autumn wind shocked me as I stepped out of the building to meet Dr. Bartlett’s carriage, and I lost my footing.

In a single instant, I slipped, falling in three painful thuds down the nine wet concrete steps of Whitechapel Hospital for Women.

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