

WHEN THEY FALL



SO DO WE ALL

# THE OVERSIGHT

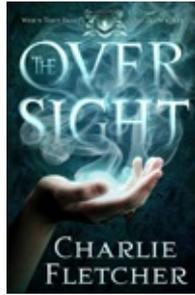
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*For Margaret Fletcher, with all my love*

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

### THE OVERSIGHT

Sara Falk—*keeper of the Safe House in Wellclose Square*

Mr Sharp—*protector and sentinel*

Cook—*once a pirate*

The Smith—*smith, ringmaker and counsellor*

Hodge—*Terrier Man and ratcatcher at the Tower of London*

Emmet—*a golem*

Jed—*an Old English Terrier*

The Raven—*an even older bird*

### IN LONDON

Lucy Harker—*a lost girl*

Bill Ketch—*a ruffian*

Issachar Templebane, Esq.—*lawyer, broker and twin*

Zebulon Templebane, Esq.—*lawyer, broker and twin*

Bassetshaw, Sherehog, Vintry, Undershaft, Coram and Garlickhythe

Templebane—*adopted sons (unimpaired)*

Amos Templebane—*adopted son (mute but intelligent)*

Reverend Christensen—*pastor of the Danish Church in Wellclose Square*

Lemuel Bidgood—*parish magistrate*

William George Bunyon—*innkeeper and gaoler of the Sly House*

Bess Bunyon—*his daughter*

The Wipers—*cutthroat gang from the rookery at Seven Dials*

Magor—*their leader*

Lily—*a rentable girl from Neptune Street*

### RUTLANDSHIRE AND LONDON

Francis Blackdyke, Viscount Mountfellow—*man of science turned supranaturalist*

The Citizen—*a sea-green incorruptible, thought dead*

Whitlowe—*a running boy*

### IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Rose Pyefinch—*travelling show-woman*

Barnaby Pyefinch—*travelling showman*

Charlie Pyefinch—*their son*

Na-Barno Eagle—*stage magician, self-styled Great Wizard of the South*  
Georgiana Eagle—*his daughter, an entrancing beauty*  
Hector Anderson—*stage magician, self-styled Great Wizard of the North*  
Charles John Huffam—*a showman and owner of an Educated Pig*  
Harry Stonex—*bargee*  
Ruby Stonex—*bargess*  
The tinker—*a larcenous pedlar*

#### AT THE ANDOVER WORKHOUSE

M'Gregor—*superintendent*  
Mrs M'Gregor—*his wife*  
The Ghost of the Itch Ward—*female inmate, real name unknown*

#### BETWEEN THE WORLDS

John Dee—*known as The Walker between the Worlds*

#### BEYOND LAW AND LORE

Moleskin Coat, Woodcock Crown, Bicorn Hat, The Hunchback—*Sluagh, also known as Shadowgangers or the Night Host.*  
The Alp—*a breath-stealer from the Austro-German borderland*  
A Green Man—*run mad*

## A BENEFIT OF MONGRELS

The natural and the supranatural inhabit the same world, intersecting but largely unseen to one another, like lodgers who share a house but keep different hours, only occasionally passing on the narrow stairs. They do not speak the same language, their customs are different and their views of the world and the laws and behaviours that govern it are wildly and mutually opposed.

It is only when they bump shoulders that they take note of each other, but when they do so, arcane and infelicitous things will happen. Because of this, it is necessary that the tight spaces where such friction may occur are governed by rules, and that those rules are policed.

For centuries there have been few more crowded nests of humanity than the great beast of a city which sprawls on either side of the Thames, and it was to regulate interaction between the natural and the supranatural that the ancient Free Company known as The Oversight of London was formed.

It is a paradox perhaps of passing interest only to those who collect quaint ironies that this shadowy borderland is best patrolled by those who carry the blood of both types in their veins... or to frame it differently: the unseen picket line which prevents one world from preying on the other is policed by mongrels.

from *The Great and Hidden History of the World* by the Rabbi Dr Hayyim Samuel Falk (also known as the Ba'al Shem of London)

## PROLOGUE

*She sat in the sun making daisy chains, happy in her own world, enjoying the warmth on her face and the simple spring beauty of the white May blossom tumbling overhead against a clear blue sky.*

*Her fingers moved steadily and expertly, a thumbnail splitting a short green stalk, then feeding the next one through the hole and splitting that one, then threading another. It was repetitive work but, as is the way with some manual labour, it freed her mind to think of other things, such as the little lost ones for whom she made the chains and how pleased they should be to be garlanded with them when they were all reunited. They would feel the tickle of the daisies round their necks and know she had never forgotten them, and they would also know she had always kept on believing that, no matter how violently the happy promise of past once upon a times had been betrayed and no matter how sharp the sorrow of the present, the future might still lead to a shared happy-ever-after.*

*In the other world, the unhappy one that was not her own, she sat in shadows, almost invisible, frequently forgotten (especially at meal times) on a wooden stool propped in that dusty corner of the Itch Ward reserved for the weak-brained and the addle-pated, the ones M'Gregor the superintendent called the moaners and dribblers. She neither moaned nor dribbled but just sat there, head angled slightly as if trying to catch some imaginary or distantly remembered sunlight, face slack and unexpectant and grey, her hair pulled loosely back from her forehead, her only movement a tiny repetitive business made by her fingertips working against each other, as if—said M'Gregor's wife—she was hemming her own grave-cloth.*

*She was well enough behaved, and only when given to shrieking fits (which afflicted her occasionally) was there any pressing need to discipline her, customarily with beatings and overnight solitary exile in the Eel House, on the other side of the water meadows.*

*She ate her slop when prompted, and washed and took care of her own privy needs according to some inner timetable, but she did nothing else, neither cleaning nor stone-picking nor bone-grinding, which made her a Useless Mouth in the account book and thus one that the M'Gregors visibly resented feeding.*

*“She does nothing,” they said bitterly. “Nothing, by God. She does not even speak.”*

*And it is true that as the world turned and the months and years ground away, she did not do anything at all. But one of the things that she didn't do, even in the depths of the coldest winters or the loneliest dead watches of the night, was this:*

*She did not die.*

*And that was the reason she did nothing else: the living ghost of the Itch Ward needed every ounce of strength in her body and mind to just remember to keep on*

*living.*  
*And who to kill.*



FIRST PART

THE SCREAMING GIRL

## CHAPTER 1

### THE HOUSE ON WELLCLOSE SQUARE

If only she wouldn't struggle so, the damned girl.

If only she wouldn't scream then he wouldn't have had to bind her mouth.

If only she would be quiet and calm and biddable, he would never have had to put her in a sack.

And if only he had not had to put her in a sack, she could have walked and he would not have had to put her over his shoulder and carry her to the Jew.

Bill Ketch was not a brute. Life may have knocked out a few teeth and broken his nose more than once, but it had not yet turned him into an animal: he was man enough to feel bad about what he was doing, and he did not like the way that the girl moaned so loud and wriggled on his shoulder, drawing attention to herself.

Hitting her didn't stop anything. She may have screamed a lot, but she had flint in her eye, something hard and unbreakable, and it was that tough core that had unnerved him and decided him on selling her to the Jew.

That's what the voice in his head told him, the quiet, sly voice that nevertheless was conveniently able to drown out whatever his conscience might try to say.

The street was empty and the fog from the Thames damped the gas lamps into blurs of dull light as he walked past the Seaman's Hostel and turned into Wellclose Square. The flare of a match caught his eye as a big man with a red beard lit a pipe amongst a group standing around a cart stacked with candle-boxes outside the Danish Church. Thankfully they didn't seem to notice him as he slunk speedily along the opposite side of the road, heading for the dark house at the bottom of the square beyond the looming bulk of the sugar refinery, outside which another horse and carriage stood unattended.

He was pleased the square was so quiet at this time of night. The last thing he wanted to do was to have to explain why he was carrying such strange cargo, or where he was heading.

The shaggy travelling man in The Three Cripples had given him directions, and so he ducked in the front gates, avoiding the main door as he edged round the corner and down a flight of slippery stone steps leading to a side-entrance. The dark slit between two houses was lit by a lonely gas globe which fought hard to be seen in murk that was much thicker at this lower end of the square, closer to the Thames.

There were two doors. The outer one, made of iron bars like a prison gate, was open, and held back against the brick wall. The dark oak inner door was closed and studded with a grid of raised nailheads that made it look as if it had been hammered

shut for good measure. There was a handle marked “Pull” next to it. He did so, but heard no answering jangle of a bell from inside. He tugged again. Once more silence greeted him. He was about to yank it a third time when there was the sound of metal sliding against metal and a narrow judas hole opened in the door. Two unblinking eyes looked at him from behind a metal grille, but other than them he could see nothing apart from a dim glow from within.

The owner of the eyes said nothing. The only sound was a moaning from the sack on Ketch’s shoulder.

The eyes moved from Ketch’s face to the sack, and back. There was a sound of someone sniffing, as if the doorman was smelling him.

Ketch cleared his throat.

“This the Jew’s house?”

The eyes continued to say nothing, summing him up in a most uncomfortable way.

“Well,” swallowed Ketch. “I’ve got a girl for him. A screaming girl, like what as I been told he favours.”

The accompanying smile was intended to ingratiate, but in reality only exposed the stumpy ruins of his teeth.

The eyes added this to the very precise total they were evidently calculating, and then abruptly stepped back and slammed the slit shut. The girl flinched at the noise and Ketch cuffed her, not too hard and not with any real intent to hurt, just on a reflex.

He stared at the blank door. Even though it was now eyeless, it still felt like it was looking back at him. Judging. He was confused. Had he been rejected? Was he being sent away? Had he walked all the way here carrying the girl—who was not getting any lighter—all for nothing? He felt a familiar anger build in his gut, as if all the cheap gin and sour beer it held were beginning to boil, sending heat flushing across his face. His fist bunched and he stepped forward to pound on the studded wood.

He swung angrily, but at the very moment he did so it opened and he staggered inward, following the arc of his blow across the threshold, nearly dumping the girl on the floor in front of him.

“Why—?!” he blurted.

And then stopped short.

He had stumbled into a space the size and shape of a sentry box, with no obvious way forward. He was about to step uneasily back out into the fog, when the wall to his right swung open.

He took a pace into a larger room lined in wooden tongue-and-groove panelling with a table and chairs and a dim oil lamp. The ceiling was also wood, as was the floor. Despite this it didn’t smell of wood, or the oil in the lamp. It smelled of wet clay. All in all, and maybe because of the loamy smell, it had a distinctly coffin-like atmosphere. He shivered.

“Go on in,” said a calm voice behind him.

“Nah,” he swallowed. “Nah, you know what? I think I’ve made a mistake—”

The hot churn in his guts had gone ice-cold, and he felt the goosebumps rise on his skin: he was suddenly convinced that this was a room he must not enter, because if he did, he might never leave.

He turned fast, banging the girl on the doorpost, her yip of pain lost in the crash as the door slammed shut, barring his escape route with the sound of heavy bolts

slamming home.

He pushed against the wood, and then kicked at it. It didn't move. He stood there breathing heavily, then slid the girl from his shoulder and laid her on the floor, holding her in place with a firm hand.

"Stay still or you shall have a kick, my girl," he hissed.

He turned and froze.

There was a man sitting against the back wall of the room, a big man, almost a giant, in the type of caped greatcoat that a coachman might wear. It had an unnaturally high collar, and above it he wore a travel-stained tricorne hat of a style that had not been seen much on London's streets for a generation, not since the early 1800s. The hat jutted over the collar and cast a shadow so deep that Ketch could see nothing of the face beneath. He stared at the man. The man didn't move an inch.

"Hoi," said Ketch, by way of introduction.

The giant remained motionless. Indeed as Ketch stepped towards him he realised that the head was angled slightly away, as if the man wasn't looking at him at all.

"Hoi!" repeated Ketch.

The figure stayed still. Ketch licked his lips and ventured forward another step. Peering under the hat he saw the man was brown-skinned.

"Oi, blackie, I'm a-talking to you," said Ketch, hiding the fact that the giant's stillness and apparent obliviousness to his presence was unnerving him by putting on his best bar-room swagger.

The man might as well be a statue for the amount he moved. In fact—

Ketch reached forward and tipped back the hat, slowly at first.

It wasn't a man at all. It was a mannequin made from clay. He ran his thumb down the side of the face and looked at the brown smear it left on it. Damp clay, unfired and not yet quite set. It was a well made, almost handsome face with high cheekbones and an impressively hooked nose, but the eyes beneath the prominent forehead were empty holes.

"Well, I'll be damned..." he whispered, stepping back.

"Yes," said a woman's voice behind him, cold and quiet as a cutthroat razor slicing through silk. "Oh yes. I rather expect you will."

## CHAPTER 2

### A WOMAN IN BLACK AND THE MAN IN MIDNIGHT

She stood at the other end of the room, a shadow made flesh in a long tight-bodied dress buttoned to the neck and wrists. Her arms were folded and black leather gloves covered her hands. The dress had a dull sheen like oiled silk, and she was so straight-backed and slender—and yet also so finely muscled—that she looked in some ways like a rather dangerous umbrella leaning against the wood panelling.

The only relief from the blackness was her face, two gold rings she wore on top of the gloves and her white hair, startlingly out of kilter with her otherwise youthful appearance, which she wore pulled back in a tight pigtail that curled over her shoulder like an albino snake.

She hadn't been there when Ketch entered the room, and she couldn't have entered by the door which had been on the edge of his vision throughout, but that wasn't what most disturbed him: what really unsettled him was her eyes, or rather the fact he couldn't see them, hidden as they were behind the two small circular lenses of smoked glass that made up her spectacles.

"Who—?" began Ketch.

She held up a finger. Somehow that was enough to stop him talking.

"What do you want?"

Ketch gulped, tasting his own fear like rising bile at the back of his throat.

"I want to speak to the Jew."

"Why?"

He saw she carried a ring of keys at her belt like a jailer. Despite the fact she looked too young for the job he decided that she must be the Jew's housekeeper. He used this thought as a stick to steady himself on: he'd just been unnerved by her sudden appearance, that was all. There must be a hidden door behind her. Easy enough to hide its edges in the tongue and groove. He wasn't going to be bullied by a housekeeper. Not when he had business with her master.

"I got something for him."

"What?"

"A screaming girl."

She looked at the long sack lying on the floor.

"You have a *girl* in this sack?"

Somehow the way she asked this carried a lot of threat.

"I want to speak to the Jew," repeated Ketch.

The woman turned her head to one side and rapped on the wooden wall behind her.

She spoke into a small circular brass grille.

“Mr Sharp? A moment of your time, please.”

The dark lenses turned to look at him again. The silence was unbearable. He had to fill it.

“Man in The Three Cripples said as how the Jew would pay for screaming girls.”

The gold ring caught the lamplight as the black gloves flexed open and then clenched tight again, as if she were containing something.

“So you’ve come to sell a girl?”

“At the right price.”

Her smile was tight and showed no teeth. Her voice remained icily polite.

“There are those who would say *any* price is the wrong one. The good Mr Wilberforce’s bill abolished slavery nearly forty years ago, did it not?”

Ketch had set out on a simple errand: he had something to sell and had heard of a likely buyer. True, he’d felt a little like a Resurrection Man skulking through the fog with a girl on his shoulder, but she was no corpse and he was no bodysnatcher. And now this woman was asking questions that were confusing that simple thing. When life was straightforward, Bill Ketch sailed through it on smooth waters. When it became complicated he became confused and when he became confused, anger blew in like a storm, and when he became angry, fists and boots flew until the world was stomped flat and simple again.

“I don’t know nothing about a Wilberforce. I want to speak to the Jew,” he grunted.

“And why do you think the Jew wants a girl? By which I mean: what do you think the Jew wants to do with her?” she asked, the words as taut and measured as her smile.

“What he does is none of my business.”

He shrugged and hid his own bunched fists deep in the pockets of his coat.

Her words cracked sharply across the table like a whiplash.

“But what you think you are doing by selling this girl is mine. Answer the question!”

This abrupt change of tone stung him and made him bang the table and lurch towards her, face like a thundercloud.

“No man tells Bill Ketch what to do, and sure as hell’s hinges no damn woman does neither! I want to see the bloody Jew and by God—”

The wall next to her seemed to blur open and shut and a man burst through, slicing across the room so fast that he outpaced Ketch’s eyes, leaving a smear of midnight blue and flashing steel as he came straight over the table in a swirl of coat-tails that ended in a sudden and dangerous pricking sensation against his Adam’s apple.

The eyes that had added him up through the judas hole now stared into him across a gap bridged by eighteen inches of razor-sharp steel. The long blade was held at exactly the right pressure to stop him doing anything life-threatening, like moving. Indeed, just swallowing would seem to be an act of suicide.

“By any god, you shall not take one step further forward, Mr...”

The eyes swept over his face, searching, reading it.

“Mr Ketch is it? Mr William Ketch...?”

He leaned in and Ketch, frozen, watched his nostrils flare as he appeared to smell him. The midnight blue that the man was dressed in seemed to absorb even more light

than the woman's black dress. He wore a knee-length riding coat cut tight to his body, beneath which was a double-breasted leather waistcoat of exactly the same hue, as were the shirt and tightly knotted silk stock he wore around his neck. The only break in the colour of his clothing was the brown of his soft leather riding boots.

His hair was also of the darkest brown, as were his thick and well-shaped eyebrows, and his eyes, when Ketch met them, were startlingly... unexpected.

Looking into them Ketch felt, for a moment, giddy and excited. The eyes were not just one brown, not even some of the browns: they were *all* the browns. It was as if he was looking into a swirl of autumn leaves tumbling happily in the golden sunlight of a blazing Indian summer.

One look into the tawny glamour in those eyes and Ketch forgot the blade at his throat.

One look into those eyes and the anger was gone and all was simple again.

One look into those eyes and Bill Ketch was confusingly and irrevocably in something as close to love as to make no difference.

The man must have seen this because the blade did something fast and complicated and disappeared beneath the skirts of his coat as he reached forward, gripped Ketch by both shoulders and pulled him close, sniffing him again and then raising an eyebrow in surprise, before pushing him back and smiling at him like an old friend.

"He is everything he appears to be, and no more," he said over his shoulder.

The woman stepped forward.

"You are sure?"

"I thought I smelled something on the air as he knocked, but it didn't come in with him. I may have been mistaken. The river is full of stink at high tide."

"So you are sure?" she repeated.

"As sure as I am that you will never tire of asking me that particular question," said the man.

"'Measure twice, cut once' is a habit that has served me well enough since I was old enough to think," she said flatly, "and it has kept this house safe for much longer than that."

"Are you the Jew?" said Ketch. His voice squeaked a little as he spoke, so happy was he feeling, bathed in the warmth of the handsome young man's open smile.

"I do not have that honour," he replied.

The woman appeared at the man's shoulder.

"Well?" she said.

The chill returned to Ketch's heart as she spoke.

"He is as harmless as he appears to be, I assure you," repeated the man.

She took off her glasses and folded them in one hand. Her eyes were grey-green and cold as a midwinter wave. Her words, when they came, were no warmer.

"I am Sara Falk. I am the Jew."

As Ketch tried to realign the realities of his world, she put a hand on the man's shoulder and pointed him at the long bundle on the floor.

"Now, Mr Sharp: there is a young woman in that sack. If you would be so kind."

The man flickered to the bundle on the floor, again seeming to move between time instead of through it. The blade reappeared in his hand, flashed up and down the sacking, and then he was helping the girl to her feet and simultaneously sniffing at her

head.

“Mr Sharp?” said Sara Falk.

“As I said, I smelled something out there,” he said. “I thought it was him. It isn’t, nor is it her.”

“Well, good,” she said, the twitch of a smile ghosting round the corner of her mouth. “Maybe it was your imagination.”

“It pleases you to make sport of me, my dear Miss Falk, but I venture to point out that since we are charged with anticipating the inconceivable, my ‘imagination’ is just as effective a defensive tool as your double-checking,” he replied, looking at the girl closely. “And since our numbers are so perilously dwindled these days, you will excuse me if I do duty as both belt and braces in these matters.”

The young woman was slender and trembling, in a grubby pinafore dress with no shoes and long reddish hair that hung down wavy and unwashed, obscuring a clear look at her face. At first glance, however, it was clear she was not a child, and he judged her age between sixteen and twenty years old. She flinched when he reached to push the hair back to get a better look at her and make a more accurate assessment, and he stopped and spoke quietly.

“No, no, my dear, just look at me. Look at me and you’ll see you have nothing to fear.”

After a moment her head came up and eyes big as saucers peered a question into his. As soon as they did the trembling calmed and she allowed him to push the hair back and reveal what had been done to her mouth to stop the screaming.

He exhaled through his teeth in an angry hiss and then gently turned her towards Sara Falk. She stared at the rectangle of black hessian that was pasted across the girl’s face from below her nose down to her chin.

“What is this?” said Mr Sharp, voice tight, still keeping the girl steady with his eyes.

“It’s just a pitch-plaster, some sacking and tar and pitch, like a sticky poultice, such as they use up the Bedlam Hospital to quiet the lunatics...” explained Ketch, his voice quavering lest Mr Sharp’s gaze when it turned to add him up again was full of something other than the golden warmth he was already missing. “Why, the girlie don’t mind a—”

“Look at her hands,” said Sara Falk.

The girl’s hands were tightly wrapped in strips of grubby material, like small cloth-bound boxing gloves.

“Nah, that she does herself, she done that and not me,” said Ketch hurriedly. “I takes ’em off cos she’s no bloody use with hands wrapped into stumps like that, but she wraps whatever she can find round ’em the moment you turn your back. Why even if there’s nothing in the rooms she’ll rip up her own clothes to do it. It’s all she does: touches things and then screams at what ain’t there and tangles rags round her hands like a winding cloth so she doesn’t have to touch anything at all...”

Sara Falk exchanged a look with Mr Sharp.

“Touches things? Then screams?” he said. “Old stones, walls... those kind of things?”

Ketch nodded enthusiastically. “Walls and houses and things in the street. Sets ’er off something ’orrible it does—”

“Enough,” said Mr Sharp, his eyes on Sara Falk who was stroking the scared girl’s hair. Their eyes met once more.

“So she’s a Glint then,” he said quietly.

She nodded, for a moment unable to speak.

“She’s not right in the head is what she is,” said Ketch. “And—”

“Is she your daughter?” said Sara Falk, clearing something from her throat.

“No. Not blood kin. She’s... my ward, as it were. But I can’t afford to feed her no more, so it’s you or the poorhouse, and the poorhouse don’t pay, see...?”

The spark of commerce had reignited in his eyes.

“Don’t worry about that blessed plaster, lady. Why, a hot flannel held on for a couple of minutes loosens it off, and you can peel it away without too much palaver.”

The man and the woman stared at him.

“The redness fades after a couple of days,” he insisted. “We tried a gag, see, but she loosens them or gnaws through. She’s spirited—”

“What is her name?” said Sara Falk.

“Lucy. Lucy Harker. She’s just—”

“Mr Sharp,” she said, cutting him off by turning away to kneel by the girl.

“What do you want to do with him?” said the man in midnight.

“What I *want* to do to a man who’d sell a young woman without a care as to what the buyer might want to do with or to her is undoubtedly illegal,” said Sara Falk almost under her breath.

“It would be justice though,” he replied equally softly.

“Yes,” she said. “But we, as I have said many times, are an office of the Law and the Lore, not of Justice, Mr Sharp. And Law and Lore say to make the punishment fit the crime. Do what must be done.”

Lucy Harker looked at her, still mute behind the gag.

Mr Sharp left them and turned his smile on Ketch, who relaxed and grinned expectantly back at him.

“Well,” said Mr Sharp. “It seems we must pay you, Mr Ketch.”

The thought of money coming was enticing and jangly enough to drown out the question that had been trying to get Ketch’s attention for some time now, namely how this good-looking young man knew his name. He watched greedily as he reached into his coat and pulled out a small leather bag.

“Now,” said Mr Sharp. “Gold, I think. Hold out your hands.”

Ketch did so as if sleepwalking, and though at first his eyes tricked him into the thought that Mr Sharp was counting tarnished copper pennies into his hand, after a moment he realised they were indeed the shiniest gold pieces he had ever seen, and he relaxed enough to stop looking at them and instead to study more of Mr Sharp. His dark hair was cropped short on the back and sides, but was long on top, curling into a cowlick that tumbled over his forehead in an agreeably untidy way. A single deep blue stone dangled from one ear in a gold setting, winking in the lamplight as he finished his tally.

“... twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. That’s enough, I think, and if not it is at least... traditional.”

And with that the purse disappeared and the friendly arm went round Ketch’s shoulder, and before he could quite catch up with himself the two of them were out in

the fog, walking out of Wellclose Square into the tangle of dark streets beyond.

Ketch's heart was soaring and he felt happier than he had ever been in his life, though whether it was because of the unexpectedly large number of gold—gold!—coins in his pockets, or because of his newfound friend, he could not tell.

## CHAPTER 3

### A CHARITABLE DEED

If the fog had eyes (which in this part of London it often did) it would not only have noticed Mr Sharp leading Bill Ketch away into the narrow streets at the lower end of the square, it would have remarked that the knot of men who had been unloading boxes of candles into the Danish Church had finished their work, and that the carrier's cart had taken them off into the night, leaving only the burly red-bearded man with the pipe and a wiry underfed-looking young fellow in a tight fustian coat.

The bearded man locked the heavy doors and then followed the other across the street, heading for the dark carriage still standing outside the sugar refinery. If the fog's eyes had also been keen, they would have noticed that the red beard overhung a white banded collar with two tell-tale tabs that marked him out as the pastor of the church whose barn-like doors he had just secured. There was a crunch underfoot as they reached the carriage and he looked down at the scattering of oyster shells with surprise. The wiry youth, unsurprised, reached up and rapped his bony knuckles on the polished black of the carriage door.

"Father," he said. "'Tis the Reverend Christensen. 'E wishes to thank you in person."

There was a pause as if the carriage itself was alive and considering what had been said to it. Then it seemed to shrug as something large moved within, the weight shifting it on its springs, and then the door cracked open.

The reverend's beard parted to reveal an open smile as the pastor leant into the carriage apologetically.

"So sorry to discommode you, Mr Templebane, but I could not let the opportunity of thanking you in person pass me by."

"No matter, no matter at all," said a deep voice from inside. "Think no more of it, my dear reverend sir. My pleasure indeed. Only sorry we had to deliver at so unholy an hour."

"All hours are holy, Mr Templebane," smiled the pastor, his English scarcely accented at all. "And any hour that contains such a welcome donation is all the more blessed."

"Please!" said the voice, whose owner remained hidden except for the appearance in the carriage window of a fleshy hand carefully holding an open oyster with the smallest finger extended politely away from all the others. The shell was full of plump grey oyster meat that bobbed and spilled a little of the shellfish's liquor as the hand airily waved the thanks away.