
Opening Extract from...

The Crimson Petal and the White

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PART I

The Streets

ONE

atch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.

When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you're actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness, stumbling on uneven ground, recognising nothing. Looking left and right, blinking against an icy wind, you realise you have entered an unknown street of unlit houses full of unknown people.

And yet you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let's not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name, or at least show you a good time. Now you hesitate, still holding on to me, but tempted to let me go. When you first picked me up, you didn't fully appreciate the size of me, nor did you expect I would grip you so tightly, so fast. Sleet stings your cheeks, sharp little spits of it so cold they feel hot, like fiery cinders in the wind. Your ears begin to hurt. But you've allowed yourself to be led astray, and it's too late to turn back now.

It's an ashen hour of night, blackish-grey and almost readable like undisturbed pages of burnt manuscript. You blunder forward into the haze of your own spent breath, still following me. The cobblestones beneath

your feet are wet and mucky, the air is frigid and smells of sour spirits and slowly dissolving dung. You hear muffled drunken voices from somewhere nearby, but what little you can understand doesn't sound like the carefully chosen opening speeches of a grand romantic drama; instead, you find yourself hoping to God that the voices come no closer.

The main characters in this story, with whom you want to become intimate, are nowhere near here. They aren't expecting you; you mean nothing to them. If you think they're going to get out of their warm beds and travel miles to meet you, you are mistaken.

You may wonder, then: why did I bring you here? Why this delay in meeting the people you thought you were going to meet? The answer is simple: their servants wouldn't have let you in the door.

What you lack is the right connections, and that is what I've brought you here to make: connections. A person who is worth nothing must introduce you to a person worth next-to-nothing, and that person to another, and so on and so forth until finally you can step across the threshold, almost one of the family.

That is why I've brought you here to Church Lane, St Giles: I've found just the right person for you.

I must warn you, though, that I'm introducing you at the very bottom: the lowest of the low. The opulence of Bedford Square and the British Museum may be only a few hundred yards away, but New Oxford Street runs between there and here like a river too wide to swim, and you are on the wrong side. The Prince of Wales has never, I assure you, shaken the hand of any of the residents of this street, or even nodded in passing at anyone here, nor even, under cover of night, sampled the prostitutes. For although Church Lane has more whores living in it than almost any other street in London, they are not of the calibre suitable for gentlemen. To connoisseurs, a woman is more than a carcass after all, and you can't expect them to forgive the fact that the beds here are dirty, the décor is mean, the hearths are cold and there are no cabs waiting outside.

In short, this is another world altogether, where prosperity is an exotic dream as distant as the stars. Church Lane is the sort of street where even the cats are thin and hollow-eyed for want of meat, the sort of street where men who profess to be labourers never seem to labour and so-called washerwomen rarely wash. Do-gooders can do no good here, and are sent on their way with despair in their hearts and shit on their shoes. A model lodging-

house for the deserving poor, opened with great philanthropic fanfare twenty years ago, has already fallen into the hands of disreputables, and has aged terribly. The other, more antiquated houses, despite being two or even three storeys high, exude a subterranean atmosphere, as if they have been excavated from a great pit, the decomposing archaeology of a lost civilisation. Centuries-old buildings support themselves on crutches of iron piping, their wounds and infirmities poulticed with stucco, slung with clothes-lines, patched up with rotting wood. The roofs are a crazy jumble, the upper windows cracked and black as the brickwork, and the sky above seems more solid than air, a vaulted ceiling like the glass roof of a factory or a railway station: once upon a time bright and transparent, now overcast with filth.

However, since you've arrived at ten to three in the middle of a freezing November night, you're not inclined to admire the view. Your immediate concern is how to get out of the cold and the dark, so that you can become what you'd thought you could be just by laying your hand on me: an insider.

Apart from the pale gas-light of the street-lamps at the far corners, you can't see any light in Church Lane, but that's because your eyes are accustomed to stronger signs of human wakefulness than the feeble glow of two candles behind a smutty windowpane. You come from a world where darkness is swept aside at the snap of a switch, but that is not the only balance of power that life allows. Much shakier bargains are possible.

Come up with me to the room where that feeble light is shining. Let me pull you in through the back door of this house, let me lead you through a claustrophobic corridor that smells of slowly percolating carpet and soiled linen. Let me rescue you from the cold. I know the way.

Watch your step on these stairs; some of them are rotten. I know which ones; trust me. You have come this far, why not go just a little farther? Patience is a virtue, and will be amply rewarded.

Of course – didn't I mention this? – I'm about to leave you. Yes, sadly so. But I'll leave you in good hands, excellent hands. Here, in this tiny upstairs room where the feeble light is shining, you are about to make your first connection.

She's a sweet soul; you'll like her. And if you don't, it hardly matters: as soon as she's set you on the right path, you can abandon her without fuss. In the five years since she's been making her own way in the world, she has never got within shouting distance of the sorts of ladies and

gentlemen among whom you'll be moving later; she works, lives and will certainly die in Church Lane, tethered securely to this rookery.

Like many common women, prostitutes especially, her name is Caroline, and you find her squatting over a large ceramic bowl filled with a tepid mixture of water, alum and sulphate of zinc. Using a plunger improvised from a wooden spoon and old bandage, she attempts to poison, suck out or otherwise destroy what was put inside her only minutes before by a man you've just missed meeting. As Caroline repeatedly saturates the plunger, the water becomes dirtier – a sure sign, she believes, that the man's seed is swirling around in it rather than in her.

Drying herself with the hem of her shift, she notes that her two candles are dimming; one of them is already a guttering stub. Will she light new ones?

Well, that depends on what time of night it is, and Caroline has no clock. Few people in Church Lane do. Few know what year it is, or even that eighteen and a half centuries are supposed to have passed since a Jewish troublemaker was hauled away to the gallows for disturbing the peace. This is a street where people go to sleep not at a specific hour but when the gin takes effect, or when exhaustion will permit no further violence. This is a street where people wake when the opium in their babies' sugar-water ceases to keep the little wretches under. This is a street where the weaker souls crawl into bed as soon as the sun sets and lie awake listening to the rats. This is a street reached only faintly, too faintly, by the bells of church and the trumpets of state.

Caroline's clock is the foul sky and its phosphorescent contents. The words 'three a.m.' may be meaningless to her, but she understands perfectly the moon's relationship with the houses across the street. Standing at her window, she tries for a moment to peer through the frozen grime on the panes, then twists the latch and pushes the window open. A loud snapping noise makes her fear momentarily that she may have broken the glass, but it's only the ice breaking. Little shards of it patter onto the street below.

The same wind that hardened the ice attacks Caroline's half-naked body too, eager to turn the sheen of perspiration on her pimpled breast into a sparkle of frost. She gathers the frayed collars of her loose shift into her fist and holds them tight against her throat, feeling one nipple harden against her forearm.

Outside it is almost completely dark, as the nearest street-lamp is half a dozen houses away. The cobbled paving of Church Lane is no longer white with snow, the sleet has left great gobs and trails of slush, like monstrous spills of semen, glowing yellowish in the gas-light. All else is black.

The outside world seems deserted to you, holding your breath as you stand behind her. But Caroline knows there are probably other girls like her awake, as well as various scavengers and sentinels and thieves, and a nearby pharmacist staying open in case anyone wants laudanum. There are still drunkards on the streets, dozed off in mid-song or dying of the cold, and yes, it's even possible there's still a lecherous man strolling around looking for a cheap girl.

Caroline considers getting dressed, putting on her shawl and going out to try her luck in the nearest streets. She's low on funds, having slept most of the day away and then passed up a willing prospect because she didn't like the look of him; he had a poxy air about him, she thought. She regrets letting him go now. She ought to have learned before today that it's no use waiting for the perfect man to come along.

Still, if she goes out again now, that would mean lighting another two candles, her last. The harsh weather must be considered, too: all that thrashing about in bed raises your temperature and then you go out in the cold and lose it all; a medical student once told her, as he was pulling on his trousers, that that was the way to catch pneumonia. Caroline has a healthy respect for pneumonia, although she confuses it with cholera and thinks gargling plenty of gin and bromide would give her a good chance of survival.

Of Jack the Ripper she need have no fear; it's almost fourteen years too early, and she'll have died from more or less natural causes by the time he comes along. He won't bother with St Giles, anyway. As I told you, I'm introducing you at the bottom.

A particularly nasty gust of wind makes Caroline shut the window, sealing herself once more into the box-like room she neither owns nor, properly speaking, rents. Not wanting to be a lazy slut, she tries her best to imagine walking around out there with an enigmatic look on her face; tries to conjure up a picture of an eligible customer stepping out of the darkness to call her beautiful. It doesn't seem likely.

Caroline rubs her face with handfuls of her hair, hair so thick and dark

that even the crudest men have been known to stroke it in admiration. It has a silky texture, and is warm and pleasant against her cheeks and eyelids. But when she takes her hands away she finds that one of the candles has drowned in its puddle of fat, while the other still struggles to keep its flaming head above it. The day is over, she must admit, and the day's earnings are in.

In the corner of the otherwise empty room sags the bed, a wrinkled and half-unravelled thing like a bandaged limb that has been unwisely used for a rough, dirty chore. The time has come, at last, to use this bed for sleeping. Gingerly, Caroline inserts herself between the sheets and blankets, taking care not to tear the slimy undersheet with the heels of her boots. She'll take her boots off later, when she's warmer and can face the thought of unhooking those long rows of buttons.

The remaining candle-flame drowns before she has a chance to lean over and blow it out, and Caroline rests her head back against a pillow fragrant with alcohol and foreheads.

You can come out of hiding now. Make yourself comfortable, for the room is utterly dark, and will remain that way until sunrise. You could even risk, if you wish, lying down beside Caroline, because once she's asleep she's dead to the world, and wouldn't notice you – as long as you refrained from touching.

Yes, it's all right. She's sleeping now. Lift the blankets and ease your body in. If you are a woman, it doesn't matter: women very commonly sleep together in this day and age. If you are a man, it matters even less: there have been hundreds here before you.

A while yet before dawn, with Caroline still sleeping beside you and the room barely warmer than freezing outside the blankets, you had better get out of bed.

It's not that I don't appreciate you have a long and demanding journey ahead of you, but Caroline is about to be jolted violently awake, and it's best you aren't lying right next to her at that moment.

Take this opportunity to engrave this room on your memory: its dismal size, its moisture-buckled wooden floor and candle-blackened ceiling, its smell of wax and semen and old sweat. You will need to fix it clearly in your mind, or you'll forget it once you've graduated to other, better rooms which smell of pot-pourri, roast lamb and cigar smoke; large, high-ceilinged

rooms as ornate as the patterns of their wallpaper. Listen to the faint, fidgety scufflings behind the skirting-boards, the soft, half-amused whimper of Caroline's dreams . . .

A monstrous shriek, of some huge thing of metal and wood coming to grief against stone, rouses Caroline from her sleep. She leaps out of bed in terror, throwing her sheets into the air like a flurry of wings. The shrieking grinds on for several more seconds, then gives way to the less fearsome din of a whinnying animal and human curses.

Caroline is at her window now, like almost every other resident of Church Lane. She's squinting into the gloom, excited and confused, trying to find evidence of disaster. There's none at her own doorstep, but farther along the street, almost at the lamp-lit corner, lies the wreck of a hansom cab still shuddering and splintering as the cabman cuts loose his terrified horse.

Her view hampered by dark and distance, Caroline would like to lean further out of the window, but gusts of icy wind drive her back into the room. She begins a fumbling search for her clothes, under the scattered bed-sheets, under the bed; wherever the last customer may have kicked them. (She really needs spectacles. She will never own any. They turn up in street markets from time to time, and she tries them on but, even allowing for the scratches, they're never right for her eyes.)

By the time she's back at her window, rugged up and fully roused, events have moved on remarkably quickly. A number of policemen are loitering around the wreck with lanterns. A large sack or maybe a human body is being bundled into a wagon. The cabbie is resisting invitations to climb aboard, and instead circles his upended vehicle, tugging at bits of it as if to test how much more it can possibly fall apart. His horse, placid now, stands sniffing the behinds of the two mares yoked to the police-wagon.

Within minutes, as the pale sun begins to rise over St Giles, whatever can be done has been done. The living and the dead have trundled away, leaving the wrecked cab in their wake. Splintered wheel-spokes and window-frame glass shards hang still as sculpture.

Peeping over Caroline's shoulder, you may think there's nothing more to see, but she remains hypnotised, elbows on the window-sill, shoulders still. She isn't looking at the wreck anymore; her attention has shifted to the house-fronts across the street.

There are faces at all the windows there. The silent faces of children, individually framed, or in small groups, like shop-soiled sweetmeats in a closed-down emporium. They stare down at the wreck, waiting. Then, all at once, as if by communal agreement on the number of seconds that must pass after the cabman's disappearance around the corner, the little white faces disappear.

At street level, a door swings open and two urchins run out, quick as rats. One is dressed only in his father's boots, a pair of ragged knickerbockers and a large shawl, the other runs barefoot, in a night-shirt and overcoat. Their hands and feet are brown and tough as dog's paws; their infant physiognomies ugly with misuse.

What they're after is the cab's skin and bone, and they're not shy in getting it: they attack the maimed vehicle with boyish enthusiasm. Their small hands wrench spokes from the splintered wheel and use them as chisels and jemmies. Metal edgings and ledges snap loose and are wrenched off in turn; lamps and knobs are beaten, tugged and twisted.

More children emerge from other filthy doorways, ready for their share. Those with sleeves roll them up, those without fall to work without delay. Despite their strong hands and wrinkled beetle-brows, none of them is older than eight or nine, for although every able-bodied inhabitant of Church Lane is wide awake now, it's only these younger children who can be spared to strip the cab. Everyone else is either drunk, or busy preparing for a long day's work and the long walk to where it may be had.

Soon the cab is aswarm with Undeserving Poor, all labouring to remove something of value. Practically everything is of value, the cab being an object designed for a caste many grades above theirs. Its body is made of such rare materials as iron, brass, good dry wood, leather, glass, felt, wire and rope. Even the stuffing in the seats can be sewn into a pillow much superior to a rolled-up potato sack. Without speaking, and each according to what he has in the way of tools and footwear, the children hammer and gouge, yank and kick, as the sound echoes drily in the harsh air and the framework of the hansom judders on the cobblestones.

They know their time is likely to be short, but it proves to be even shorter than expected. Scarcely more than fifteen minutes after the first urchins' assault on the wreck, a massive two-horse brewer's dray turns the corner and rumbles up the lane. It carries nothing except the cabman and three well-muscled companions.

Most of the children immediately run home with their splintery armfuls; the most brazen persist for another couple of seconds, until angry shouts of 'Clear off!' and 'Thief!' send them scurrying. By the time the dray draws up to the wreck, Church Lane is empty again, its house-fronts innocent and shadowy, its windows full of faces.

The four men alight and walk slowly around the cab, clockwise and counter-clockwise, flexing their massive hands, squaring their meaty shoulders. Then, at the cabman's signal, they lay hands on the four corners of the wreck and, with one groaning heave, load it onto the dray. It settles more or less upright, two of its wheels having been plundered.

No time is wasted scooping up the smaller fragments. The horse snorts jets of steam as it's whipped into motion, and the three helpers jump on, steadying themselves against the mangled cab. The cabman pauses only to shake his fist at the scavengers behind the windows and yell, 'This 'ere was my *life*!' and then he, too, is carted away.

His melodramatic gesture impresses nobody. To the people of Church Lane, he is a lucky man, a survivor who ought to be grateful. For, as the dray rattles off, it exposes a pattern of dark blood nestled between the cobbles, like a winding crimson weed.

From where you stand you can actually see the shiver of distaste travelling down between Caroline's shoulder-blades: she's not brave about blood, never has been. For a moment it seems likely she'll turn away from the window, but then she shudders exaggeratedly, to shake off the gooseflesh, and leans forward again.

The dray has gone, and here and there along the house-fronts doors are swinging open and figures are emerging. This time it's not children but adults – that is, those hardened souls who've passed the age of ten. The ones who have a moment to spare – the bill-poster, the scrubber, and the fellow who sells paper windmills – dawdle to examine the blood-spill; the others hurry past, wrapping shawls or scarves around their scrawny necks, swallowing hard on the last crust of breakfast. For those who work in the factories and slop-shops, lateness means instant dismissal, and for those who seek a day's 'casual' labouring, there's nothing casual about the prospect of fifty men getting turned away when the fittest have been chosen.

Caroline shudders again, this time from the chill of a distant memory. For she was one of these slaves herself once, hurrying into the grey dawn

every morning, weeping with exhaustion every night. Even nowadays, every so often when she has drunk too much and sleeps too deeply, a brute vestige of habit wakes her up in time to go to the factory. Anxious, barely conscious, she'll shove her body out of bed onto the bare floor just the way she used to. Not until she has crawled to the chair where her cotton smock ought to be hanging ready, and finds no smock there, does she remember who and what she's become, and crawl back into her warm bed.

Today, however, the accident has shocked her so wide awake that there's no point trying to get more sleep just yet. She can try again in the afternoon – indeed, she'd *better* try again then, to reduce the risk of falling asleep next to some snoring idiot tonight. A simple fuck is one thing, but let a man sleep with you just once and he thinks he can bring his dog and his pigeons.

Responsibilities, responsibilities. To get enough sleep, to remember to comb her hair, to wash after every man: these are the sorts of things she must make sure she doesn't neglect these days. Compared to the burdens she once shared with her fellow factory slaves, they aren't too bad. As for the work, well . . . it's not as dirty as the factory, nor as dangerous, nor as dull. At the cost of her immortal soul, she has earned the right to lie in on a weekday morning and get up when she damn well chooses.

Caroline stands at the window, watching Nellie Griffiths and old Mrs Mulvaney trot down the street on their way to the jam factory. Poor ugly biddies: they spend their daylight hours drudging in the scalding heat for next to nothing, then come home to drunken husbands who knock them from one wall to the other. If this is what it means to be 'upright', and Caroline is supposed to be 'fallen' . . . ! What did God make cunts for, if not to save women from donkey-work?

There is one small way, though, in which Caroline envies these women, one modest pang of nostalgia. Both Nellie and Mrs Mulvaney have children, and Caroline had a child once upon a time, and lost it, and now she'll never have another. Nor was her child an illegitimate wretch: it was born in loving wedlock, in a beautiful little village in North Yorkshire, none of which things exists in Caroline's world anymore. Maybe her blighted insides couldn't even sprout another baby, and all that flushing with alum and sulphate of zinc is as pointless as prayer.

Her child would have been eight years old now, had he lived – and indeed he might have lived, had Caroline stayed in Grassington Village.

Instead, the newly widowed Caroline chose to take her son to London, because there was no dignified work in the local town of Skipton for a woman who'd not had much schooling, and she couldn't stand living on the charity of her mother-in-law.

So, Caroline and her son boarded a train to a new life together, and instead of going to Leeds or Manchester, which she had reason to suspect were bad and dangerous places, she bought tickets to the capital of the civilised world. Pinned inside her provincial little bonnet was eight pounds, a very substantial sum of money, enough for months of food and accommodation. The thought of it ought to have comforted her, but instead she was plagued by headache all the way into London, as if the massive weight of those bank-notes was bearing down hard on her neck. She wished she could spend this fortune right away, to be rid of the fear of losing it.

Within days of arriving in the metropolis she was offered help with her dilemma. A famous dress-making firm was so impressed with her manner that it commissioned her to make waistcoats and trousers in her own home. The firm would provide her with all the necessary materials, but required the sum of five pounds as a security. When Caroline ventured the opinion that five pounds seemed a great deal to ask, the man who was engaging her agreed, and assured her that the sum was not of his choosing. No doubt the manager of the firm, his own superior, had become disillusioned by the dishonest behaviour of the folk he'd taken on in more lenient times: yards and yards of the best quality cloth stolen, hawked in street markets, only to end up in tatters on the bodies of street urchins. A chastening picture for any businessman of a generous and trusting nature, did not Caroline agree?

Caroline *did* agree, then; she was a respectable woman, her boy was no urchin, and she considered herself a citizen of that same world her employer was trying to keep safe. So, she handed him the five pounds and began her career as a manufacturess of waistcoats and trousers.

The work proved to be tolerably easy and (it seemed to her) well-paid; in some weeks she earned six shillings or more, although from this must be deducted the cost of cotton, coals for pressing, and candles. She never skimped on candles, determined not to become one of those half-blind seamstresses squinting over their work by a window at dusk; she pitied the shirt-makers eulogised in 'The Song of the Shirt' in the same way that a respectable shop-keeper might pity a ragged costermonger. Though

keenly aware of how much she'd come down in the world, she was not dissatisfied: there was enough to eat for her and her boy, their lodgings in Chitty Street were clean and neat, and Caroline, being husbandless, was free to spend her money wisely.

Then winter came and of course the child fell ill. Nursing him lost Caroline valuable time, particularly in the daylight hours, and when at last he rallied she had no choice but to engage his help.

'You must be my big brave man,' she told him, her face burning, her eyes averted towards the single candle lighting their shadowy labours. No proposal she would ever make in later years could be more shameful than this one.

And so mother and son became workmates. Propped up against Caroline's legs, the child folded and pressed the garments she had sewn. She tried to make a game of it, urging him to imagine a long line of naked, shivering gentlemen waiting for their trousers. But the work fell further and further behind and her drowsy boy fell forwards more and more often, so that in order to prevent him burning himself (or the material) with the pressing iron she had to pin the back of his shirt to her dress.

This dismal partnership didn't last very long. With dozens of waistcoats still waiting, the tugs at her skirts became so frequent it was obvious the boy was more than merely tired: he was dying.

And so Caroline went to retrieve her bond from her employer. She came away with two pounds and three shillings and a sick, impotent fury that lasted for a month.

The money lasted slightly longer than that and, with her child in marginally better health due to medical attention, Caroline found work in a sweater's den making hats, jamming squares of cloth onto steaming iron heads. All day she was handing dark, shiny, scalding hats farther along a line of women, as if passing on plates of food in an absurdly steamy kitchen. Her child (forgive this impersonality: Caroline never speaks his name anymore) spent his days locked in their squalid new lodgings with his painted ball and his Bristol toys, stewing in his sickliness and fatherless misery. He was always fractious, whimpering over small things, as if daring her to lose patience.

Then one night at the end of winter he began coughing and wheezing like a demented terrier pup. It was a night very like the one we are in now: bitter and mucky. Worried that no doctor would agree, at such an hour

and in such weather, to accompany her unpaid to where she lived, Caroline conceived a plan. Oh, she'd heard of doctors who were kind and devoted to their calling, and who would march into the slums to combat their ancient foe Disease, but in all her time in London Caroline had not met any such doctor, so she thought she'd better try deception first. She dressed in her best clothes (the bodice was made of felt stolen from the factory) and dragged her boy out into the street with her.

The plan, such as it was, was to deceive the nearest physician into believing she was new to London, and hadn't a family doctor yet, and had been all evening at the theatre, and only realised her son was ill when she returned and found the nurse frantic, and had hailed a cab immediately, and was not the sort of person to discuss money.

'Doctor won't send us away?' asked the child, scoring a bull's-eye, as always, on her worst fear.

'Walk faster,' was all she could reply.

By the time they found a house with the oval lamp lit outside, the boy was wheezing so hard that Caroline was half insane, her hands trembling with the urge to rip his little throat open and give him some air. Instead she rang the doctor's bell.

After a minute or two, a man came to the door in his night-gown, looking not at all like any doctor Caroline had met before, nor smelling like one.

'Sir,' she addressed him, doing her best to keep both the desperation and the provincial burr out of her voice. 'My son needs a doctor!'

For a moment he stared her up and down, noting her outmoded monochrome dress, the frost on her cheeks, the mud on her boots. Then he motioned her to come in, smiling and laying his broad hand on her boy's shivering shoulder as he said:

'Well now, this *is* a happy coincidence. *I* need a woman.'

Five years later, moving sleepily through her bedroom, Caroline stubs her toes on the ceramic basin and is provoked to clean up her bedroom. She transfers the stagnant contraceptive bouillon carefully into the chamber pot, watching, as she pours, the germs of another man's offspring combine with piss. She heaves the full pot onto her window-sill, and pushes the window open. There's no crack of ice this time, and the air is still. She'd like to toss the liquid into the air, but the Sanitary Inspector has been sniffing around lately, reminding everyone that this is the nineteenth

century, not the eighteenth. Threats of eviction have been made. Church Lane is infested with Irish Catholics, spiteful gossips the lot of them, and Caroline doesn't want them accusing her of soliciting cholera on top of everything else.

So, she tips the chamber-pot slowly forwards and lets the mixture trickle discreetly down the brickwork. For a while the building will look as though God relieved Himself against it, but then the problem will get solved one way or another, before the neighbours wake up – either the sun will dry it or fresh snow will rinse it.

Caroline is hungry now, a sharp belly-hunger, despite the fact that she doesn't normally wake until much, much later. She's noticed that before: if you wake up too early, you're famished, but if you wake later, you're all right again, and then later still you're famished again. Needs and desires must rise and fall during sleep, clamouring for satisfaction at the door of consciousness, then slinking away for a while. A deep thinker, that's what her husband used to call her. Too much education might have done her more harm than good.

Caroline's guts make a noise like a piglet. She laughs, and decides to give Eppie a surprise by paying an early-morning visit to The Mother's Finest. Put a smile on his ugly face and a pie in her belly.

In the cold light of day, the clothes she hastily threw on in order to see the wrecked cab don't pass muster. Rough hands have wrinkled the fabric, dirty shoes have stepped on the hems, there are even speckles of blood from the scabby shins of old Leo the dyer. Caroline strips off and starts afresh with a voluminous blue and grey striped dress and tight black bodice straight out of her wardrobe.

Getting dressed is much easier for Caroline than it is for most of the women you will meet later in this story. She has made small, cunning alterations to all her clothing. Fastenings have been shifted, in defiance of fashion, to where her hands can reach them, and each layer hides short-cuts in the layer beneath. (See? – her seamstressing skills did come in useful in the end!)

To her face and hair Caroline affords a little more attention, scrutinising the particulars in a small hand-mirror tacked upside-down to the wall. She's in fair repair for twenty-nine. A few pale scars on her forehead and chin. One black tooth that doesn't hurt a bit and is best left alone. Eyes a little bloodshot, but big and sympathetic, like those of a dog that's had

a good master. Decent lips. Eyebrows as good as anyone's. And, of course, her splendid nest of hair. With a wire brush she untangles the fringe and fluffs it out over her forehead, squaring it just above the eyes with the back of her hand. Too impatient and hungry to comb the rest, she winds it up into a pile on top of her head and pins it fast, then covers it up with an indigo hat. Her face she powders and pinks, not to conceal that she's old, ugly or corrupt in flesh, for she isn't any of these yet, but rather to brighten the pallor of her sunless existence – this for her own sake rather than for her customers.

Arranging her shawl now, smoothing down the front of her dress, she resembles a respectably well-to-do woman in a way she never could have managed when she slaved in the steam of the hat factory, suffering for her virtue. Not that an *authentic* lady could so much as fasten a garter in less than five minutes, let alone dress completely without a maid's assistance. Caroline knows very well she's a cheap imitation, but fancies herself a cheekily good one, especially considering how little effort she puts into it.

She slips out of her room, like a pretty moth emerging from a husk of dried slime. Follow discreetly after her. But you are not going anywhere very exciting yet: be patient a while longer.

On the landing and the stairs, all of last night's candles have burnt out. No new ones will be lit until the girls start bringing the men home in the afternoon, so there's not much light to see Caroline downstairs. The landing receives a lick of sunshine from her room, which she's left open to distribute the smell more evenly around the house, but the stairs, corkscrewed as they are inside a windowless stairwell, are suffocatingly gloomy. Caroline has often thought that this claustrophobic spiral is really no different from a chimney. Maybe one day the bottom-most steps will catch fire while she's on her way down and the stairwell will suck up the flames just like a chimney, the rest of the house remaining undisturbed while she and the spiral of dark stairs shoot out of the roof in a gush of smoke and cinders! Good riddance, some might say.

The first thing Caroline sees when she emerges into the light of the entrance hall is Colonel Leek seated in his wheelchair. Though he is berthed very near the foot of the stairs, he faces the front door, his back to Caroline, and she hopes that this morning he might, for once, be asleep.

'Think I'm asleep, don't you girlie?' he promptly sneers.

'No, never,' she laughs, though it's far too early in the day for her to

be a convincing liar. She squeezes past the Colonel and lets him examine her for a moment, so as not to be rude, for he never forgets an insult.

Colonel Leek is the landlady's uncle, a pot-bellied stove of a man, keeping the warmth in with overcoats, scarves and blankets, stoking up on gossip, and puffing out smoke through a stunted pipe. Concealed under all the layers, Colonel Leek still wears his military uniform complete with medals, though these have a handkerchief sewn over them to prevent them catching. In the last war he went to, the Colonel accepted a bullet in the spine in exchange for a chance to take pot-shots at mutineering Indians, and his niece has cared for him ever since, installing him as her 'toll-collector' when she opened the empty rooms of her house to prostitutes.

Colonel Leek performs his job with grim efficiency, but his true passion remains war and other outbursts of violence and disaster. When he reads his daily newspaper, happy events and proud achievements fail to capture his interest, but as soon as he comes across a calamity he cannot contain himself. It often happens that Caroline, hard at work in her room, must suddenly croon more loudly in a customer's ear to cover the noise of a hoarsely shouted recitation from downstairs, such as:

'Six thousand Tartars have invaded the Amoor Province, wrested fifteen years ago from China!'

Now the Colonel fixes his bloodshot eyes on Caroline, and whispers meaningfully: '*Some* of us don't sleep through disaster. *Some* of us knows what goes on.'

'You mean that cab this mornin'?' guesses Caroline, well accustomed to his turn of mind.

'I *saw*,' the Colonel leers, trying to raise himself up off his perennially festering rear. 'Death and damage.' He falls back on the cushions. 'But that was only the *beginning*. A small part of what's afoot. The local manifestation. But everywhere! everywhere! Disaster!'

'*Do* let us go, Colonel. I'll drop if I don't 'ave a bite to eat.'

The old man looks down at his blanketed lap as if it were a newspaper and, raising his forefinger periscopically, recites:

'Disastrous overturn of train at Bishop's Itchington. Gunpowder explosion on the Regent's Canal. Steamer gone down off the Bay of Biscay. Destruction by fire of the *Cospatrick*, half-way to New Zealand, four hundred and sixty lost, mere days ago. Think of it! These are *signs*. The whirlpool of disaster. And at the centre of it – what there, eh? What there?'

Caroline gives it a couple of seconds' thought, but she has no idea what there. Alone of the three women who use Mrs Leek's house as their lay and lodgings, she's oddly fond of the old man, but not enough to prefer his demented prophesies to a hearty breakfast.

'Goodbye, Colonel,' she calls as she swings open the door and sweeps out into the street, closing him in behind her.

Now prepare yourself. You have not much longer with Caroline before she introduces you to a person with slightly better prospects. Watch her bodice swell as she inhales deeply the air of a new day. Wait for her to plot her safe passage through Church Lane, as she notes where the dung is most densely congregated. Then watch your step as you follow her towards Arthur Street, walking briskly along the line of litter left in the wake of the cab: first the blood, then a trail of seat-stuffing and wood-splinters. Perhaps they'll lead all the way to The Mother's Finest tavern, where hot pies are served from dawn and no one is going to ask you if you knew the woman who died.