

# PEOPLE OF ABANDONED CHARACTER

Clare Whitfield

# *One More Gone to London*

## *Reading, 1885*

*It was a bad day for a funeral: the wind was high, the sun weak and the threat of rain too strong. Impossible to dress for. Impossible. The sun came out and one wilted under all those layers – the woollen greatcoat, the sober waistcoat, the top hat – and then a breeze took up and one's fingers turned blue. Impossible.*

*Mr Radcliffe noted the sparse congregation. As the deceased's solicitor, he was duty bound to attend, but the vicar's wife had had to practically coerce people from the parish to pay their respects, so she'd said. St Bartholomew's was a crumbling relic of a church, so at least the small pews didn't appear so vacant. Mrs Alma Chapman had insisted on being buried there, in 'the real church', next to her husband. The church proper was now in the main village; a bigger, better church, for a bigger, better England.*

*For each shovelful of earth the gravedigger attempted to throw on top of the late Mrs Chapman, a gust of wind blew most of it across the faces of the people standing around the grave willing the whole torturous event to a conclusion. A last laugh, perhaps; an indication of the old woman's feelings towards the congregation. It was not a dignified or elegant spot; the farm was in plain view, the donkey could be heard braying, and as the wind took up the gravedigger's earth once again, the gathering finally gave up and started to move away. Even the vicar retreated.*

*Now it was only Mr Radcliffe and the Chapman granddaughter, a tall column of black, her mourning veil pressed against her cheeks by the wind. Hands clasped in pious, observant grief. She appeared young enough, though according to his records the girl was very much a woman. But then everyone looked young to him these days, and he never had had a firm grasp on how to judge a woman's age. They did things to themselves, with hair, and feathers and hats; it could be most confusing.*

*Mr Radcliffe knew Susannah Chapman the way he knew most people, through annotations in documents: records of life and death, the stuff of ink and blotting paper. The poor thing, what should a girl-woman do with herself when she had no male relatives to offer protection and no real wealth behind her? Throw herself on the mercy of those that would have her, he supposed. In his head he had already prepared what he would say to her after the funeral. A*

*few short words of solace, inspiration, even. He had been overly preoccupied with this, for what could a man of his age have to say to a young woman? For once he wished he'd brought his wife along.*

*He would start along the lines of: 'Death, to those left behind, does not mean the end but a new beginning. We must forge a new path, over muddy tracks and hard ground...' He was especially fond of the 'muddy track's part, but as he took the first step to deliver his monologue, the girl gathered her skirts out of the boggy ground and turned to leave, and he had to almost gallop to catch her. It was not lost on him that it was now he who was negotiating a muddy track.*

*'Miss Chapman, won't you wait a minute. I only want to speak with you a moment.'* Mr Radcliffe waved his hat, quite out of breath by the time he caught up with her.

*'Forgive me, I'm sorry to bother you so soon after your grandmother's passing. I only mean to leave you with a thought, and that is that, for you, this is a new beginning—'*

*'Yes, Mr Radcliffe, thank you. I understand. I'm sorry, I must hurry. I have much to do.'* And she turned like a great black obelisk, the veil making it impossible to see her features clearly.

*'Allow me to walk with you, Miss Chapman. I have news that could offer you some reassurance, security, even,'* he said, making strenuous efforts to keep up with the young woman's stride.

*He explained how he had been approached by the vicar's wife with an offer of accommodation and a small salary in exchange for domestic and educational assistance with her six girls. Now that both Miss Chapman's grandparents were dead, the best she could do would be to rent their house to tenants and find herself a husband, quick smart.*

*'I would ask you to thank the vicar and his wife for me formally, but I will have to decline their kind and generous offer,'* she said. *'I'm off to London, on the first train tomorrow.'*

*Well, that was quite unexpected.*

*'Whatever for?'* he said, feeling dread at what he anticipated would be the most naive of answers.

*What was it about London that turned the heads of silly women? What could a spinster of twenty-seven from a small village know of London and its insatiable appetites? How many girls had floated to the city on clouds of dreams only to fall into bad habits with bad people? The air was yellow, the stink of the river enough to make one choke, and beggars slept in heaps in the open like flea-ridden cats. More than once he had walked a street and not heard a word of his own language. In his own country!*

*It was certainly no place for an unmarried woman. These young girls, they thought it would be all hats and dresses. That they would go to the races every day, pick flowers in the park and be courted by a line of enamoured dukes waiting on bended knee. If only they knew of the broken-spirited, the hungry and the homeless, they'd never set a foot on the train.*

*'I am to become a nurse, Mr Radcliffe, at the London Hospital, in Whitechapel. Really, I am grateful for the offer, but I can't stay, not another minute. Not now they are both gone. You must understand.'*

*'Well then, my dear, I wish you good luck in your endeavours. I was making assumptions, but I can see you are a strategist – no, a pioneer!'*

*She bid him farewell and left him sinking further into the mud. There was scant hope she would thrive. It was not the way of the city. In a village, a man could make a little money with hard work, be honest, fear God and heave himself up a rung or two. He could call himself a success. London was no place for ascension, despite all the promises. Oh, there was gold, all right: a fortune could be won and lost, or stolen, on the same day. But only the rich, the criminal or the criminally insane thrived in London.*

# One

1888

We married in St Jude's, Whitechapel, a tiny dilapidated church that appeared to have sprouted like a fungus between two unconcerned buildings in Commercial Street. The vicar complained that the congregation only ventured inside on Sundays if it rained, and even then expected dole money, otherwise they'd be skipping and dipping down Petticoat Lane. I wore a blue travelling dress and a straw bonnet that Sister Park had insisted on decorating with a veil and paper orange blossoms, squinting at it by candlelight in the room we shared above the hospital. I told her to save her eyes, but she wouldn't hear of it, being the sort that finds cheer in such pointless rituals.

Thomas's best man was a fellow doctor, Dr Richard Lovett. I remembered him vaguely from the hospital, our paths not destined to cross, and only met him properly the day we were married. They seemed as close as two friends could be: laughing with each other, elbows into ribs and sly winks. They even resembled each other, both being dark and well groomed, tall and slender; they could have been brothers.

As soon as we were married, I told Matron Luckes, and she fired me on the spot, as I knew she would. A married woman could only devote herself to one profession, that of wife. A nurse was too demanding a career to accept anything other than complete devotion. There ended my career as a nurse, the career I'd gambled my very existence on procuring, in the process rejecting everything my grandmother had wished for me. I had moved willingly to quite possibly the worst part of London and for two years had studied by candlelight until I was near blind, to attain the coveted position of ward sister. Now I'd thrown that career away with both hands in a fit of cavalier delirium. Nevertheless, I couldn't believe my luck: a plain old maid like me marrying so well, and to a young and beautiful man who adored me. It shouldn't have happened. For a moment I really did believe in miracles.

I was giddy with joy and excited for our future. I felt rubber-stamped and approved by all things proper. Catapulted into another realm. Only weeks before, I had not known how I would carry on or what to do with myself, and now I had an entirely different existence and someone to make this future with. There was only one instance when I played my part badly. In the run-up to our marriage, when he suggested we honeymoon in Brighton, I hesitated. He asked if I'd

ever been there before. I lied and said no. It was not a bad lie, but Brighton held memories for me and there would be no easy way to explain it.

My new husband took me to a hotel called the Royal Albion opposite Brighton Pier. It rained constantly, but I barely noticed. Summer had trouble starting in the year of 1888; it coughed and spluttered, trying to clear its lungs of a bitter winter. Only the occasional blast of light was able to break through the ashen clouds. We locked ourselves away in our room with its huge windows up to the ceiling. The murders hadn't started yet. I was just another June bride on her honeymoon, struck with euphoria at my novel world and far from Whitechapel, unaware the newlywed glow would tarnish.

At night, the wind would become trapped inside our hotel room and howl around the ceiling. We lay in bed and listened to its whistling with our limbs wrapped around each other, the skin of our bodies smooth and warm, like paper.

'See how we fit, Chapman,' he said. 'We fit so perfectly together, don't you think? As if we were chiselled from the same piece of rock. Made to match.'

And we did fit. I was happy. It was such sudden relief from the misery I'd nearly drowned in, I almost didn't recognise it. This new excitement at a future with someone else, after I'd given up all hope of ever feeling happiness like that again. We stayed in bed morning, noon and night in those first days. Thomas was building his private practice and had few patients on his books, which made it the perfect time to take a holiday. Soon he'd be far too busy to take any leave. He had grand ambitions, my wonderful husband. If we did not take a holiday now, when would we next have the chance? Anything was possible. Everything could be ours. That was the feeling I'd missed, the feeling that the future could and would be marvellous. Together we would make it so.

We used to leave our burrow for food, and then, like children, we'd chase each other up the stairs on all fours and disappear under the bedclothes. He showed me how to put drops of laudanum in brandy, which burned my chest and made my head seem as if it would explode, like I was falling down a bottomless black hole. But when he kissed me all over, I burst into fits of laughter.

We were living in a barrel of feathers. Thomas experienced the world through his senses, and he had an appetite for it all: food and music, art and beautiful things, architecture and adventure, liquor and laudanum. We were no angels, but we never professed to be. Thomas was drawn on impulse to whatever would give him pleasure in that moment, and, in those days, pleasing me was one such. It was a soft and sensory experience; all lust. As yet I was unaware the same desires would quickly become torturous. I was fascinated by him. After the dark

events of the last few months, I felt I was being pushed in a different direction and that this was the right path, the life in the light I craved. This man and my role of wife would be the new terrain I could explore and conquer. I would be damn good at it.

Thomas was often like an excitable child, skipping around, eyes always on me, bleary with a damp glaze as if spellbound. He tried to hold my hand at all times. I would wait as long as I could, then attempt to slip free, only for his fingers to search mine out again. His attention was so intense, it was embarrassing. People stared, although I don't believe he noticed. It was as if he didn't care about anything or anyone but us. This wasn't driven by rudeness or a conscious aim to offend; it was simply a matter of training. Thomas had never been conditioned to consider others or to imagine he might not matter as much as other people. Thomas thought he mattered very much, and, as his wife, so did I.

I wanted nothing more than to be like him. Now that I was married to an upper-middle-class doctor, I pictured a life free of the exhausting, ever looming fear of poverty, free of the drudgery of hard, physical labour, of never being able to earn enough money to put a bit aside. Now at last I had the opportunity to create wealth rather than merely exist. This was my chance. I only had one job: to stop myself from ruining it.