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Opening extract from

The Magnificent Lizzie Brown and the Mysterious Phantom

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CHAPTER 1

'Ain't you up yet, girl?'

Pa's iron grip jerked Lizzie awake.

'All right, all right!' Lizzie shook him off and kicked free of her ragged blanket. She swung her legs over the side of her rough wooden bed and stuck her feet into her boots.

Dawn light filtered through rags pinned over the window. The cracked door to their tiny room was still swinging where Pa had barged through.

He was carrying a package wrapped in tattered newspaper. For a foolish moment, Lizzie wondered if he'd been out to fetch her a present. Perhaps he'd

brought a nice bit of mackerel. That would be a proper treat – it would make a change from yesterday's dry bread.

Pa slammed the package down on the table. Lizzie guessed from the clunk that it was a bottle of gin and her heart sank.

'Are you drinkin' already?' she muttered.

'I'll need somethin' to keep me insides warm while I'm out there earnin' enough to keep you.' Pa flung a resentful frown at her as he sat on the edge of his bunk and began rolling up his trouser legs. 'Give me the soap and fetch down the vinegar. I'm using the Scaldrum Dodge today. Be quick, lazy-legs. I want to catch the swells on their way to work.'

Lizzie jumped to her feet and grabbed the soap from its dish, then passed it to Pa. As she stood on tiptoes to reach the jar of vinegar above, she had to push aside the bright streamers of coloured paper which she'd pinned behind the rafters the night before, safely out of sight. The sixpence she'd earned doing laundry for Mrs Buckle had been enough to buy all she needed to make paper flowers. A trayful of handmade posies might earn enough to get a room of her own somewhere far away from here.

Lizzie lived in Rat's Castle, London's filthiest slum. It was thick with thieves and choked by stench. Houses leaned against each other and the tiny alleys between them were no more than sewers. Dead ends, courts and yards forked this way and that, with passages below and walkways above that felons could run through like vermin. To Lizzie it had always been home, but she found life there unbearable.

There were six children in the room next to Lizzie and Pa's, with a mother and grandmother all crammed into two beds and only an oil lamp between them. Lizzie could hear them now, the baby wailing with hunger, the children squabbling and the grandmother screeching curses at her daughter. Upstairs, men snored and grunted, sleeping off the drink that had them roaring most of the night.

The bright streamers fluttered above her, whispering the promise of a new life. She smiled to herself.

'What you smirkin' at?' Pa broke into Lizzie's dream and she nearly dropped the vinegar. She knew that tone of voice. It was dangerous.

'Nothing, Pa.' She slid the jar onto the table, but to her horror she saw that her streamers had caught his eye.

'What you want that nonsense for?' Pa began to rub soap thickly over his shins. 'Wastin' good money.'

'It ain't wasted, Pa,' Lizzie argued. 'I'm gonna make flowers to sell to the toffs on Rotten Row.'

'Lot of hard work.' Pa's legs were streaked yellow with soap. 'Why work when you can turn your hand to some useful beggin' or thievin'? Rich folks are there for us to steal from. I've spent enough time teaching you how to screw a penny out of a mug's pocket. You're twelve now, so you should be bringin' in money of yer own. A skinny, sickly-looking girl like you will fetch plenty from beggin'. If you just let your hair get knotted once in a while… Stop brushing it for gawd's sake! And try hobblin' a bit. There's plenty to be earned for a beggar with a limp. And a cough. Why don't you try coughin' a little—'

'I ain't beggin' or stealin' no more,' Lizzie interrupted him sharply. 'It ain't no life.'

She wasn't going to pretend to have a cough for anyone. Ma died from a cough last year. Grief pinched at Lizzie's heart as she remembered her mother spitting up blood, half-delirious with fever. Lizzie had pleaded with Pa, 'Let me stay home and tend to her.' But Pa had dragged her onto the streets, making use of her

tear-stained face to squeeze money from tender-hearted passers-by.

Lizzie had known that Pa had a half-crown in his pocket on that day, but he wouldn't spend it on a doctor for Ma – he was saving it for the gin palace. Ma had to cough and sweat alone, without even a sip of brandy to ease her suffering.

At least I was with her at the end. Lizzie closed her eyes, remembering how soft Ma's hair had felt as she'd stroked it. Tears pricked in her eyes as the memories filled her mind, but she blinked them away – she wasn't going to let Pa see her cry. Like Ma said when her older brother John had died three years ago: 'You can waste the day cryin', or you can tuck him safe in your heart and let his memory keep you warm.'

Lizzie shoved the memory away. She couldn't bring John back. Or Ma. But they were both safe in her heart.

Pa's boots scraped the floor. 'What do you mean, you ain't beggin' or stealin' no more?'

Lizzie heard a ripping noise. She looked up with a gasp. Her father was clutching a handful of paper streamers.

'No!' She leaped and grabbed his arm. But it was too late – he'd torn them and flung them onto the floor.

‘My flower paper!’ Lizzie dropped to her knees and began snatching it up frantically. ‘I was going to earn enough to get out of here.’

‘Get out of ’ere?’ With a heavy boot, Pa began to grind the paper into the grime. ‘Why do you want to get out of ’ere? Are you too good for the Castle, mi’lady?’

‘I’m done with stealin’ and beggin’!’ Lizzie jumped to her feet. ‘I wish *you* were too!’ Trembling with rage, she grabbed the jar off the table and splashed vinegar over Pa. The soap bubbled and frothed on his legs till they looked leprous with ulcers. ‘That’s what you wanted, ain’t it?’ she shrieked. She’d seen him use the soap and vinegar trick a hundred times. Fake sores earned more pennies to spend at the gin palace. ‘With legs like that, you’ll earn enough to drink yourself silly!’

Pa growled, and Lizzie swallowed, scared. What had she done? Pa’s shins were dripping with froth, and fear dropped like a stone into the pit of her belly as his face hardened into a scowl. She knew what he could do; she’d watched him beat Ma and John enough times.

He lunged at her. ‘You ungrateful guttersnipe!’

Lizzie ducked.

‘I’ll murder you!’ he roared.

Before she could duck again, his fist slammed against her cheek. It sent her reeling backwards, and she knocked against the wall, making plates rattle on the shelves.

Half-blind with pain, she saw Pa coming at her again, his face dark with fury. Terror flared through her and she dived between his legs and darted for the door. Fingers tugged at her skirt, but Lizzie tore free and raced out into the hall.

Swinging round the banister post she ran down the stairs, taking them three at a time. Her father's boots thundered after her, but she didn't look round before bursting out into the street.

People jostled along the narrow lane, and she slipped between them, bobbing and weaving, nimble as a prize-fighter, till Pa's roars faded far behind her.

Heart thumping, she stumbled to a halt and leaned against a wall. People passed, hardly seeing her, no one looking twice at her flushed face. Rat's Castle was filled with street urchins – for all anyone knew, Lizzie was just another pickpocket fleeing a copper.

She loosened her shawl, hot from running. Thank heaven it'd been a freezing night. The hard April frost meant she'd gone to her bed wearing every piece of

clothing she possessed. If it had been summer, she'd be in her nightgown.

She looked about, wondering which way to go. A man was herding a pig along the muddy lane. Two washerwomen heaved sacks of clothing on their backs, bent under their weight, while a rosy-cheeked fellow balanced a tray in the crook of his arm. 'Hot sheeps' feet!' he called.

The delicious smell made Lizzie's mouth water, but her pockets were empty. She glanced down the lane, terrified that she would see her father's face.

'Lizzie?' A wizened hand grasped her sleeve. 'Spare some change?'

Lizzie pulled away, recognizing one of the old crones who begged outside their tenement. 'I've got nothing.'

'Is that Lizzie Brown?' A blind old man was tapping his way toward her with a cane.

She had to hide – this pair would sell her back to Pa for a penny. She hopped over the gutter and ducked between the washerwomen's bulging sacks. Keeping low, she shadowed them this way and that as they wended their way through the alleys of Rat's Castle. She passed closed doors, boarded windows and narrow passageways. Above her the sky was no more than a

strip of blue between the crowded roofs.

Where could she hide? She hadn't got a penny on her, and she would need one for an inn or a room. Thanks to her father, she knew how to snatch watches or handkerchiefs, but she was determined no one would make a pickpocket of her. Mud splashed her boots as she followed the chattering washerwomen. One of them glanced back, frowning suspiciously.

'Oi, what you followin' us for?'

'I wasn't followin'!'

'Gerr-away!'

As the washerwoman lifted a hand to clip her ear, Lizzie darted down an alley. Hardly wide enough to squeeze through, it ran between ramshackle houses. Light glowed at the end. Her heart lifting, Lizzie hurried along and burst out into sunshine.

She blinked in the brightness. Hansom cabs whisked by, their wheels rattling. Men in stiff collars, bedecked with glittering watch chains, strode down wide, clean pavements. Women in stripes and ruffles twirled parasols as they passed gleaming shop windows.

Oxford Street.

After the filth and gloom of Rat's Castle, it was like stepping into another world.