opening extract from

Ivy

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Part One

When she was born her father took one look at her and spat into a corner.

'Red 'air,' he wheezed. 'Like Judas, an' the whores down Ratcliff Highway. She'll 'ave a temper to match the Devil's, strike me if she won't. An' no decent man'll keep company with 'er, you mark my words.'

Then he went stomping and wheezing into the night to spend the coal money on beer.

'Take no notice, missis,' sniffed an elderly neighbour, parking her rump on a rickety chair in order to light her pipe. 'Some men just ain't good at senty-ment. 'E don't mean nothin' by it.'

The woman on the heap of flock and sacks that passed for a bed tried to smile but was too weak.

And the flame-haired infant in her arms lay very still and quiet as if she knew she had just been written off as a hot-headed trollop and it pained her.

After a while the woman and the baby snuggled closer and the baby's fist escaped from its shawl of rags to wave and bang against the woman's breast.

'Little thing,' crooned the woman, stroking the tiny hand with one finger. 'Little tiny thing.' It was no bigger than a leaf, that baby hand, but its grip as it curled around the woman's finger was surprisingly strong.

Ivy.

They called her Ivy. And no one expected her to blossom. Not in the slums of south London. And certainly not with red 'air.

CHAPTER 1

In which Ivy is treated rather badly by philanthropists in ridiculous dresses

Mrs Hortense Merryfield and Mrs Christiana Larrington of the Ragged Children's Welfare Association (South London branch) chose a bitterly cold spring morning upon which to patronize the deserving poor of Lambeth.

Picking their way along filthy streets, the hems of their crinolines blotting up slush and the beads on their bonnets tinkling like ice, they were so obviously out of their element that by the time they reached the corner of New Cut a sizeable crowd of ragged children was on their tail, hopping and flapping and begging for coppers.

'Jus' a ha'penny, missis. Jus' enough for a hot 'tater.'

'It's for me bruvver, missis. Me little bruvver wot's sick.'

'Shoo!' cried Mrs Merryfield. 'Scram!' And she waved her umbrella and stood her ground until all but one of the little imps had given up the clamour and scattered.

Mrs Larrington, who was younger than her companion, drew a mohair shawl tighter round her shoulders and tried not to seem afraid. This was her first time out among the deserving poor and she was beginning to wish she had stayed in Norwood, among snowdrops and servants and the undeserving rich. Where had they come from, all those ragamuffins? So pale, so dirty, and so clearly half-frozen

that they might have sprung fully formed from the slush. Yet they'd had the strength, all of them, to run like bunnikins from the point of Mrs Merryfield's umbrella. Even the *girls* had scarpered.

It was the sight of those scarpering girls, Mrs Larrington realized, that had disturbed her the most. For she herself had never run anywhere. Not even as a child. It wasn't ladylike; it wasn't *natural* for the female of the species to move so fast.

She was about to say as much to dear Mrs Merryfield when she felt a tugging at her sleeve. And *'Ugh!'* she shuddered, shrinking away. 'Don't *touch* me, you . . . you insolent creature.'

'I live 'ere, if you please,' piped a voice at her elbow. 'Only your dress is blockin' the way.'

Looking down, over the slope of her crinoline, Mrs Larrington found her gaze being met by a little scrap of indeterminate age. A small girl with huge hazel eyes and a veritable halo of tangled hair. It was a cross between a nest and a cloud, that hair, and such an extraordinary colour that Mrs Larrington's gloved hand moved instinctively to stroke it.

'Stop! My dear Mrs Larrington. What can you be thinking of? There will be more lice on this child than you'll find crumbs in a biscuit barrel. First rule of home visits—keep your distance.'

And with a prod and a twist, the redoubtable Mrs Merryfield hooked the crook of her umbrella under the ragged girl's collar and yanked her up and away.

'Oh my,' declared Mrs Larrington, as the child rose into the air, flailing like a raggedy fish. 'Oh, my goodness me.'

But the child said not a word; only struggled and gulped while her face turned very pink beneath several layers of dirt and her extraordinary hair whipped around her head in a flurry of tangles and tendrils.

Now had Mrs Merryfield's umbrella been a dainty contraption of ruched silk and spindled ivory it would have snapped for sure. But this umbrella was like its owner—sturdy. Its point had seen off pickpockets, bull terriers, and many a drunken sailor. And its hard wooden handle, carved to resemble a bird with its beak open, was more than equal to bearing—temporarily, anyway—the weight of a skinny underfed little girl.

'Oh my,' Mrs Larrington repeated, as her companion swung the child expertly across the cobbles and landed her, with a barely audible 'thwunk', in a puddle of muck and melting snow. 'Oh, my goodness me.'

'There!' Mrs Merryfield unhooked the umbrella. 'That's more like it.' And from somewhere about her person she whipped a rag; one of the many squares of calico she carried for the specific purpose of wiping whichever bit of her umbrella had been used to prod, poke, or occasionally lift the undeserving poor to a distance where neither their lice nor their thieving fingers could threaten her own person.

The little girl seemed too stunned to move. Her bottom would have been turning as wet and cold as a polar bear's, yet she remained in the muddy puddle, staring up in hurt astonishment at the one who had dumped her there.

Mrs Larrington dithered.

Mrs Merryfield carried on wiping. All around the handle she went, pressing the rag into every dip and dent of

the carved bird, and taking particular care with the open beak in case it contained a microscopic helping of lice.

'Oi! What's goin' on? Git up offer them wet cobbles. And 'oo said you could wear me jacket? Me snazziest jacket wot I bartered me ticker an' chain for down Petticoat Lane and ain't worn meself no more than once, an' that only to check the fit of it.'

Mrs Larrington gave such a start that she almost snapped something in her corset. Mrs Merryfield (who never bothered with corsets, preferring ease of movement, particularly in Lambeth) turned and raised her umbrella.

'Young man,' she scolded, 'I must ask you to mind your manners. Such bellowing and agitation is exceeding rude, and quite . . .'

'Git up, I said. And if me jacket's spoiled you'll get an 'iding you won't forget in a month of Sundays, strike me if you won't.'

And before Mrs Larrington could unflutter her nerves, or Mrs Merryfield do any more bashing, prodding, or hooking, a ragged boy darted across the cobbles, grabbed the child in the puddle and whisked her back onto her feet.

'Give it 'ere.'

The jacket in question was a soiled but still gaudy blue with brass buttons the size of jam lids down the front. On the child it looked more like a coat. Miserably she shrugged it off and handed it over. Underneath she wore a cotton dress with a pattern of roses faded to smudges. It was tissue-thin that dress and she shivered silently in it and swayed a little, her feet still planted in the puddle.

The boy was holding the jacket aloft, inspecting it carefully. He himself wore dark cord trousers, good-ish boots, and a plush velvet cap. His waistcoat had two

mother-of-pearl buttons left on it, and he had arranged a scarlet neckerchief to cover the place where the topmost buttons were missing. Skinny and grubby though he was, he was clearly a bit of a dandy.

'A rip!' he hollered. *'A big rip under me collar! Right—now you're for it.'*

Lifting one hand he made a lunge for the child. Quick as a cat she ran all the way round Mrs Larrington's crinoline and disappeared down an alleyway.

The boy tried to follow.

Thwack!

'Not so fast, young man.'

Mrs Merryfield's right arm and the length of her furled umbrella blocked the entrance to the alleyway as effectively as any three-barred gate.

'What's your name?' she demanded.

The boy gaped at the umbrella and then up at Mrs Merryfield as if he couldn't quite believe they were in his way. Mrs Merryfield regarded him, ferociously, until he backed down and averted his own scowl. A charity monger. That's what she was. Uglier than a butcher's dog and with a snarl to match, but a do-gooder nonetheless.

He had no time for do-gooders. No time at all. But they could be soft touches, if you played your cards right, he knew that much.

'Your name?' Mrs Merryfield demanded again.

The boy appeared to hesitate.

Then: 'Jared,' he replied, doffing his cap and flashing her a sudden grin. 'Jared Roderick Montague Jackson at your service, ma'am.'

Mrs Merryfield's expression remained flinty.

'Ma'am,' he repeated, swivelling to bow to the other lady who, he noticed at once, looked like being a much softer touch.

Mrs Larrington risked a nervous smile. *What a long name,* she thought, *for a pauper.*

'Well then, Jared Roderick Montague Jackson,' said Mrs Merryfield, lowering her umbrella. 'And you are what—nine, ten years of age?'

The boy puffed out his chest in its partially-buttoned waistcoat.

'I turned twelve on Christmas Day, ma'am,' he said. 'Not that there was much rejoicin' of it. No, nor of our dear Saviour's birth, neither. Not with my dear mama an invalid and my papa so sorely reduced in circumstances that there ain't a moment goes by when we ain't all workin' and contrivin' as best we can to pay the rent an' put bread on the table.'

Mrs Larrington's mouth twitched. The boy had pronounced 'invalid' as in 'completely without merit' when he had surely meant 'invalid' as in 'person suffering from chronic ill health'. How on earth, she wondered, had he arrived at such an error?

Jared didn't notice, or chose to ignore, her little sneer. 'Not that we 'as a table no more, ma'am,' he continued. 'For it went for firewood a fortnight since when it were freezin' so bad the little 'uns turned blue an' we 'ad no money for coal.'

Then he gave a huge sigh and held his jacket to his cheek.

'An' now me jacket's torn,' he moaned. 'Me best jacket wot I'd intended sellin' on to pay for a bit o' fuel. Me brand new jacket wot I'd sooner barter to keep the little

'uns warm than wear on me back for so much as a minute. All torn under the collar it is now, an' good for nothin' but the rag man.'

With a sorrowful shake of the head he folded the jacket beneath his armpit and patted it once, twice, three times as if it had hurt feelings, or a pain in its sleeves . . . Then he scowled towards the alleyway and shook his fist. 'An' there's one 'oo's still to cop a good thrashin' for rippin' it. So excuse me, ladies . . .'

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Larrington, 'I rather think . . . there might have been . . .'

'HALT!' Mrs Merryfield slapped her umbrella back across the entrance to the alleyway. Her other hand she held up at Mrs Larrington, for silence.

'. . . some mistake.'

Jared paused, obediently.

'Young man,' said Mrs Merryfield. 'It sounds to me as if your family might—and I stress the word *might*—benefit from an assessment of its current situation.'

'It would benny-fit from the price of a sheep's 'ead or a bit o' bacon for the pot,' the boy declared, solemnly. 'And from summat a bit warmer than 'tater sacks to wrap the babby in.'

'Well then,' said Mrs Merryfield, her smile only a little sweeter than vinegar. 'Perhaps Mrs Larrington and I should acquaint ourselves with your entire clan. I suggest you lead the way.'

CHAPTER 2

In which Mrs Larrington suffers a terrible ordeal in an extremely confined space

The name Paradise Row did not exactly suit the collection of houses that lined the alley the way rotten molars fill a smelly mouth. Hell's Hovel would have been better. Or Purgatory Place at the very least.

'Not far, ladies,' Jared promised. 'Mind yer skirts now.'

Mrs Larrington had trouble immediately. 'I'm stuck,' she whimpered. 'My dear Mrs Merryfield, I fear I am stuck quite fast.'

And so she was, for alleyways and crinolines are about as compatible as tea parties and elephants and anyone daft enough to wear a hoop the size of a giantess's wedding ring to go visiting the poor fully deserved to get wedged between two damp and sooty walls.

'Lift it up, woman!' snapped Mrs Merryfield. 'Like me. And in future wear a smaller one. Tenth rule of home visits—dress sensibly.'

At this, Mrs Larrington felt quite faint. Had she heard correctly? Had dear Mrs Merryfield *seriously* implied that she should re-arrange her clothing in a manner that would surely reveal her *ankles*? And not just her ankles either but . . . but . . .

Evidently, Mrs Merryfield had implied precisely that, for she herself was trotting along quite briskly with the hoop

of her rather more sensible crinoline flipped all the way up at one side. And what, in doing so, had she revealed to the world? Nothing more startling, actually, than a long flannel petticoat as thick, dark, and modest as any winter skirt.

Oh dear . . . Oh, mercy me . . .

Mrs Larrington was also wearing a petticoat, and a very pretty one too with hand-embroidered violets on it and white lace round the hem. Only, her petticoat wasn't *underneath* her crinoline. No, indeed. It was, as fashion dictated, being worn over the top, to soften the line of her skirt. Which meant that should her own hoop rise up, accidentally or otherwise . . .

Oh, deary me. Oh, dreadful prospect . . .

At a complete scarlet-faced loss as to how to proceed, Mrs Larrington glanced anxiously all around. She could hear babies wailing and a man shouting. But they were indoors, thank goodness, not out. Above her head broken windows were shuttered, or blocked with planks, to keep out the biting cold. Ahead of her, only Mrs Merryfield and the ragged boy with the unsuitably long name appeared aware of her predicament.

'Come along, Mrs Larrington, do!' Mrs Merryfield ordered. 'We're here now.' So saying, she prodded Jared Roderick Montague Jackson in through an open doorway, so that his cheeky grin would not deter her companion from doing what was clearly necessary if she wasn't to remain wedged in Paradise Row until her ringlets turned to twirly icicles and her blood froze in her veins.

Somewhere close by a dog began to bark. A nasty, guttural sound it was; the kind of noise a very *large* dog might make should it find itself hungry enough to bite

the knuckles off its owner—or the toes off a silly woman sandwiched obligingly between two walls.

Mrs Larrington turned deathly pale.

Mrs Merryfield, losing patience, raised her voice to a most unladylike pitch.

'NOW!' she bellowed. 'Mobilize yourself immediately, my dear Mrs Larrington, or there may well be consequences.'

There was nothing else for it. Terrified of being set upon by a rabid lurcher, Mrs Larrington grasped the left side of her crinoline and tugged.

Nothing happened.

With trembling fingers she tugged again, this time pushing down equally hard on the other side. Still nothing. Again and again she tugged and pushed, wrestling and heaving her two handfuls of material until, finally—*whump*—up shot the left side of her skirt, petticoat, hoop and all.

'Goodness me!' exclaimed Mrs Merryfield. '*Most* unusual . . .'

And, 'Cor, what an eyeful!'. . .'Gawblimey, there's a sight!'. . .'Giddy-up, love!' cried the tenants of Paradise Row who, alerted by Mrs Merryfield's strident tones, had materialized at doorways and windows, to see what all the fuss was about.

As consequences go, this gale of merriment was nowhere near as painful for Mrs Larrington as being savaged by a starving dog would have been. It was, however, the most agonizing humiliation.

'Move faster, my dear,' Mrs Merryfield encouraged her, above whoops and snorts of laughter. 'If you possibly can.'

But Mrs Larrington, accustomed only to walking, gliding, and tiptoeing, couldn't possibly move any faster. She could only hobble stiffly along, holding her head even higher than her crinoline and doing her utmost to pretend that the guffaws and pointing fingers were all part of a ghastly dream.

At last, at long last, she reached Mrs Merryfield who, grabbing her by the elbow, muttered a most unsympathetic 'Quickly now', and bundled her into a dark hallway that was only slightly wider than the accursed alley.

Smelling salts, thought Mrs Larrington, breathing rapidly through her nose. *I fear I may require smelling salts.* Her crinoline was still tipped to one side, like a pretty, falling saucer. In the dark, and half-swooning from her ordeal thus far, she found herself past caring.

'Can you manage the stairs, ladies?' asked Jared, his voice solemn but his mouth twitching. 'Wivout attractin' another crowd, I mean?'

'It's like your impertinence to say so!' declared Mrs Merryfield, crossly. 'And yes, young man, we can most certainly manage the stairs. Mrs Larrington—walk behind me, if you please, to save yourself further shame.'

Mrs Larrington fell shakily into step. Dimly, she noticed that the banister beneath her right hand was sticky with dust and filth. Her glove was going to get badly soiled and a soiled glove, as everyone knew, was quite inadmissible when you were paying a call.

Letting go of the banister, though, was not an option. Not with the stairs so rickety and her left hand still controlling the tilt of her hoop. Her glove, she reassured herself, would be thoroughly cleaned by a maid that very

evening. Washed in tepid rainwater, with plenty of Castile soap, it would doubtless be rendered as good as new.

Her husband's crotchless woollen drawers however—saggy, moth-eaten, and the grim colour of an old rice pudding—would go straight out for the rag man. For, warm as they were when the north wind blew, she had no intention of borrowing them, or of even setting eyes on them, ever ever again.