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opening extract from

The Remarkable Life and Times of Eliza Rose

written by

Mary Hooper

published by

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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Chapter One

London, fifteen years later

‘Come along, my pretty one. Just you come by here ...’

The voice woke Eliza but was unknown to her. It was close by, but she lay still, wanting to feign sleep until she was quite sure of where she was.

‘That’s it, my beauty. Go into the box ...’

Perhaps it wasn’t she, then, who was being addressed? But still, best not to risk opening her eyes and being noticed. She tried to gauge what was happening without stirring herself. Where was she, for a start? Not at home, that much was sure. Home had never been this cold. Nor, she realised as her senses slowly returned, had it ever stunk quite so badly.

Eliza moved her foot slightly to try and judge on what sort of surface she was lying and felt a sort of slimy, gritty dampness beneath her. She was on the ground somewhere, then, without covering, and if her head hadn’t been cushioned by her arm then her face would have been down in the slime too.

There was a sharp, sudden noise, like a box being banged shut. ‘Got you, my beauty!’ said the same

female voice, with a cackle of laughter. There was then some crooning and whispering – it was ‘Beauty’ who was being addressed, Eliza supposed.

She now felt it safe to open her eyes. When she did so, however, the view before her was so disturbing that she immediately shut them again. In that instant she’d seen a long, low-ceilinged space, poorly lit by tallow candles, and some bedraggled and filthy creatures sitting around its walls, all of whom looked to be in a state of utter despair and dejection.

So, she wasn’t at home – but nor was she anywhere she could ever remember being before.

So what could she remember? Dimly, the recent past came back to her: leaving her home in Somersetshire, begging lifts on carts and haywains and, once, a river craft and then, days and days later, arriving in London and quickly getting lost in its dark byways. And becoming cold and scared and hungry.

And then ... stealing a hot mutton pasty from the pieman.

There was the answer to where she was.

Eliza’s eyelids flickered open again. To the left, not many inches from where she was lying, was a shallow channel which had been dug out from the hardened earth. There were neither windows nor ventilation in the room, and the stench from the channel – which was no more than an open sewer conveying filth and human waste, she realised – hung chokingly on the air of the room. Which wasn’t a room at all, but a cell.

She was in prison.

Slowly, she sat up and, shuffling backwards and away from the stinking ditch, leaned against the wall.

Then she surveyed her fellow prisoners.

There were perhaps twelve in the room. All were women, and four of these looked to be chained with heavy iron fetters hard against the wall. Others sat on wooden pallets or lay on the floor, curled up – whether alive or dead Eliza didn't know. The woman whom Eliza had heard a moment before was sitting nearby, crooning softly to a brown rat in a rough wood and wire cage.

'My pet ... my sweetheart,' she was saying, 'I'll feed you and make you fat.'

Eliza shivered and instinctively crossed her arms around herself in an attempt to get warm. She seemed to have lost her bundle of possessions, her woollen shawl and her cap and shoes along with them. At least, she thought, they hadn't been able to take any money from her, because the small amount she'd possessed had already been spent on the journey to London.

Her stomach ached with hunger. She thought about the pasty she'd stolen. Where was it? How long ago had she stolen it? A vision of it came into her head: warm, crumbling pastry outside and mutton and spiced potato within. Had she actually eaten it?

She feared that she had not, for she remembered now that she'd taken it from the counter of an open shop in Leadenhall and carried it swiftly around a corner to eat. She'd lifted it to her lips, opened her mouth to take a bite – actually felt it crumble on her lips – and then the shopkeeper had raced up, red-faced, apron flapping, and, calling for the watchman, had knocked her to the ground. 'Varmint! Thief!' he'd yelled. 'Taking food from honest 'keepers! I've seen your like here before.'

And then she could dimly remember being dragged through the streets and, though she couldn't remember as much, must have been thrown into this prison cell. She felt in her pocket, without much hope. If only she'd thought to shove the pasty – even half the pasty – into her pocket for later, then at least she wouldn't die of starvation. Which, right at that moment, she felt was a possibility.

Her eyes fell on the large brown rat who was running first to one corner of his cage then the other, scabbling, frantic to get out.

'You won't get out of there, my pretty darling,' the old woman said. 'You won't get out yet-a-while.' Her eyes slid past the rat to Eliza. 'So you're awake now, are you?' She moved the box containing the rat so that it was out of Eliza's view. 'Don't you set your eyes on him!'

'I wasn't,' Eliza said. Her voice sounded hoarse, croaky. How long was it since she'd spoken?

'Because he's *my* rat,' the old woman said. 'My own pretty rat.'

The woman seemed to be little more than a bag of bones and a handful of rags, but Eliza thought it best to humour her. She asked, 'Is he your pet?'

'No, he's not my pet, dearie,' the woman said, and her sunken cheeks creased and formed into a gummy smile. 'He's my dinner! He's my dinner as soon as ever he's good and ready. I'll feed him all sorts of pieces and soon get him plump.'

Eliza felt her stomach lurch and she shuddered with revulsion.

'You needn't look so dainty,' the woman said. 'After two months in here you'll be happy to eat your own arm.'

‘Where ... where is this place?’

‘Where? Why, this is Clink Prison in Southwarke,’ the woman said. ‘Tis famous. Haven’t you stayed here before?’

Eliza shook her head. ‘I’ve not long been in London.’

‘And so soon acquainted with its worthy buildings!’

‘I was hungry,’ Eliza said. ‘I stole a pasty.’

‘And I stole a whopping big pearl from a shop in Cornhill,’ the woman returned, and cackled with laughter. ‘A pasty or a pearl – see, we’re all equal here.’

Locked up with a jewel thief, Eliza thought. How her stepmother would have laughed.

‘Tis not so bad in here,’ the woman said. ‘Look about you.’ She pointed at the stone walls which were trickling with brackish water. ‘See the water laid on, just like in the big houses.’ She extended her arm to include the mould and fungi growing from fissures in the stones, which had formed themselves into irregular shapes and colours. ‘And the paintings and tapestries all provided for our delight!’ Eliza did not reply, thinking the woman at least half-mad, and she went on, ‘And here are your new friends and neighbours.’ She pointed to the hunched, shabby figures crouched or lying against the far wall. ‘A pretty and an elegant lot! Some in lace, some in ermine. See their jewels sparkling! Why, you might think yourself in the court of the king when you’re in Clink Prison!’

Eliza regarded her wordlessly. She had a dull ache in her head and, putting a hand up to her face, felt a bump on her forehead. Her legs and arms were stiff and aching too, as if she’d been lying in the same

position for some time.

‘How long have I been here?’ she asked. ‘Can you tell me?’

The woman shrugged. ‘A day and a night. Two days, maybe. They threw you in like a sack of potatoes and there you stayed.’

Eliza tried to work out what the date might be. She’d left Somerset on a Monday during the latter half of April, had walked for about seven days, had two days travelling in hay carts, then walked again a good while. She’d managed to journey two days on a river barge and used up her last coins by entering London in some style on top of a post-coach. She’d then spent a day or so wandering about the city, stunned and exhausted by the crowds and the noise and the goings-on.

‘Is it May?’ she asked. ‘And is today Sunday?’

‘Not Sunday,’ the woman said. ‘We get meat of a Sunday. And you hears church bells then. But ’tis monstrous difficult to tell one day from the next and one month from another, for ’tis all the same in here.’

Suddenly becoming aware of some shouting from outside, Eliza bent her head to one side to listen better, causing a waterfall of dark hair to fall around her shoulders.

The woman put out her hand to touch it, and it was such a skeletal, wizened hand that Eliza couldn’t help but draw back. ‘Ah, don’t mind old Charity,’ the woman said. ‘Lovely hair you’ve got, dearie. Black and shiny as oil. You could sell that.’ She dropped her voice. ‘And for a fact, you owe Charity here a favour. They would have cut your hair off while you were asleep, but I stopped them.’

‘They were going to cut it off?’ Eliza said in alarm, and, throwing back her head, wound her hair into a knot and tried to tuck it up. As she had no cap nor pins, however, it tumbled down again.

‘Five silver shillings, that would fetch,’ Charity said. ‘Maybe more.’

‘I’m not selling it!’ Eliza said. She wondered if she’d been too sharp with the woman and added, ‘But thank you kindly for saving it for me.’ The same shouts and screams came from outside again and Eliza asked Charity what it was.

‘Why, that’s just the rest of our friends and neighbours!’ she cawed, and Eliza looked away quickly from her gaping, toothless mouth. ‘They’re a-parading themselves in the yard right now, but they’ll be in soon and you can meet ’em. What a grand lot they are, too!’

Eliza nodded towards the others in the cell. ‘Why isn’t everyone outside in the yard? Isn’t it better than being stuck in here?’

‘Oh, I don’t care much for outside myself,’ Charity said. ‘And I had my pretty meal to catch. As for them over there ... they’re all as lazy as hogs in mud.’

‘Or too ill to move,’ Eliza said, as a long sigh caused her to look over to the hunched and bedraggled figures once more. ‘How long have you been here?’ she asked.

‘Oh, I live here,’ Charity said. ‘I’ve got no one to buy me out and they don’t think it’s worth transporting an old body like me, so I’ve made my home here. I’m street-bred, see, never had a place of my own, so whenever I’m freed, I just steal something else and come back in.’

Eliza looked at her in disbelief.

‘Tis better than the workhouse,’ Charity said, seeing the look on her face. ‘There you have to work to get your food, stitching or rolling twine. Here you get bread every day and if you want a scrap o’ meat you catches yourself a rat. It don’t take much more than that to fill an old body like mine. If I gets hungry I go outside in the yard and beg stuffs from passers-by.’

Eliza gestured towards where the noise was coming from. ‘Is that what they’re doing out there?’

Charity nodded, and then bent over the rat again, whispering endearments and, finding a tiny shard of something to eat in the folds of the rags she wore, pushed it through the wire of the rough cage.

Eliza put her hand to her face again, feeling the lump on her forehead. Her head still ached, and her limbs too, and she had a longing to stretch them out and breathe some air that was fresher than the fetid stench within the cell. Carefully, for she felt weak and strange, she got to her feet and felt her way along the wall, weaving her way in and out of the women lying around. The ground beneath her bare feet was damp and gritty and, feeling something crunching as she walked, she stopped to investigate and saw, to her great horror, that the ground was covered in lice, dead and alive. She also saw a woman who appeared to be wearing Eliza’s own shawl, but she looked to be such a poor, pale, stick of a person that Eliza didn’t have the heart to take it back.

She passed through a doorway and, still hugging the wall closely, edged her way along a dark passageway towards the light. She would try and recover herself,

she decided, and then work out how she was going to survive.

In the crowded yard she blinked and strained to see around her, for the sun was high and it was so bright compared to the cell that everything appeared blurred. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the light she could see that there were as many as two hundred men and women in the yard. They were standing in groups talking or arguing, sitting alone crying, parading two-by-two around the edge, or – as most of them were doing – gathered at one end of the yard where a barred window was set high into the prison wall.

The yard, Eliza realised, was set below street level, for suddenly two pairs of legs appeared in the opening and stopped. Immediately the group of prisoners closest to it set up a wailing and a shouting. ‘Spare a coin, kind sire!’ ‘Six mouths to feed, sire!’ ‘May God bless you for your kindness, sire!’

The owners of the legs bent down, revealing heavy white lace and velvet, and a few coins were thrown. Those who were lucky enough to catch these were elbowed roughly out of the way by those behind, so that they might take their place in front of the opening.

One of the girls who’d managed to get a coin came towards Eliza, smiling and holding up a coin. ‘A penny,’ she said. She bit it. ‘Tis not much, but ’tis real, and will buy me three good red herrings for my tea tonight.’

Eliza managed to smile back at her, though she was feeling so odd and faint – from hunger, she supposed – that she found it difficult to make her lips move. The

girl seemed about her age and looked friendly, however, and, although she was wearing a dress so faded that its printed flower pattern could hardly be seen, wasn't filthy by any means.

'You're newly come, aren't you?' the girl said. 'I saw you yesterday, but you were asleep.'

'I've a lump on my head and think I must have slept a good while,' Eliza said, 'for I don't remember arriving here at all. When I woke I didn't know where I was.'

'I'll wager you know now.'

'Only too well,' Eliza said ruefully.

The girl looked down. 'They took your shoes off you for garnish,' she said.

Eliza looked at her, puzzled.

'For your keep. You have to pay to be in here, you know. And if you haven't got money then they take your clothes instead.'

'How will I get on without shoes, though?'

'Oh, you'll find some in time. Earn 'em or steal 'em!'

Eliza shrugged. At that moment she had other, more pressing needs. 'When do we get some food?'

'We had our bread at midday – were you still asleep?' the girl said, and, on hearing that she was, went to one of the several burly turnkeys standing around and spoke to him in a bold and forthright manner, pointing several times to Eliza. After a while she came back with a hunk of greyish-looking bread, which, despite it not looking at all appetising, Eliza fell upon, stuffing it into her mouth with as much relish as if it was roast goose.

The girl looked at her and laughed. 'If you stay

close I'll let you have one of my herrings later.'

Eliza smiled gratefully, but did not stop chewing.

'And ... and I've long felt 'twould be good to have someone of my own age to rub along with, so if you've a mind to, we two can be friends and share what little else we have.'

'With all my heart,' Eliza said, and was mightily relieved to have found her.