



the
magic place

Chris Wormell

FICKLING
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David Fickling Books

31 Beaumont Street
Oxford OX1 2NP, UK

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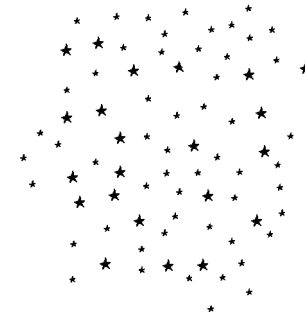


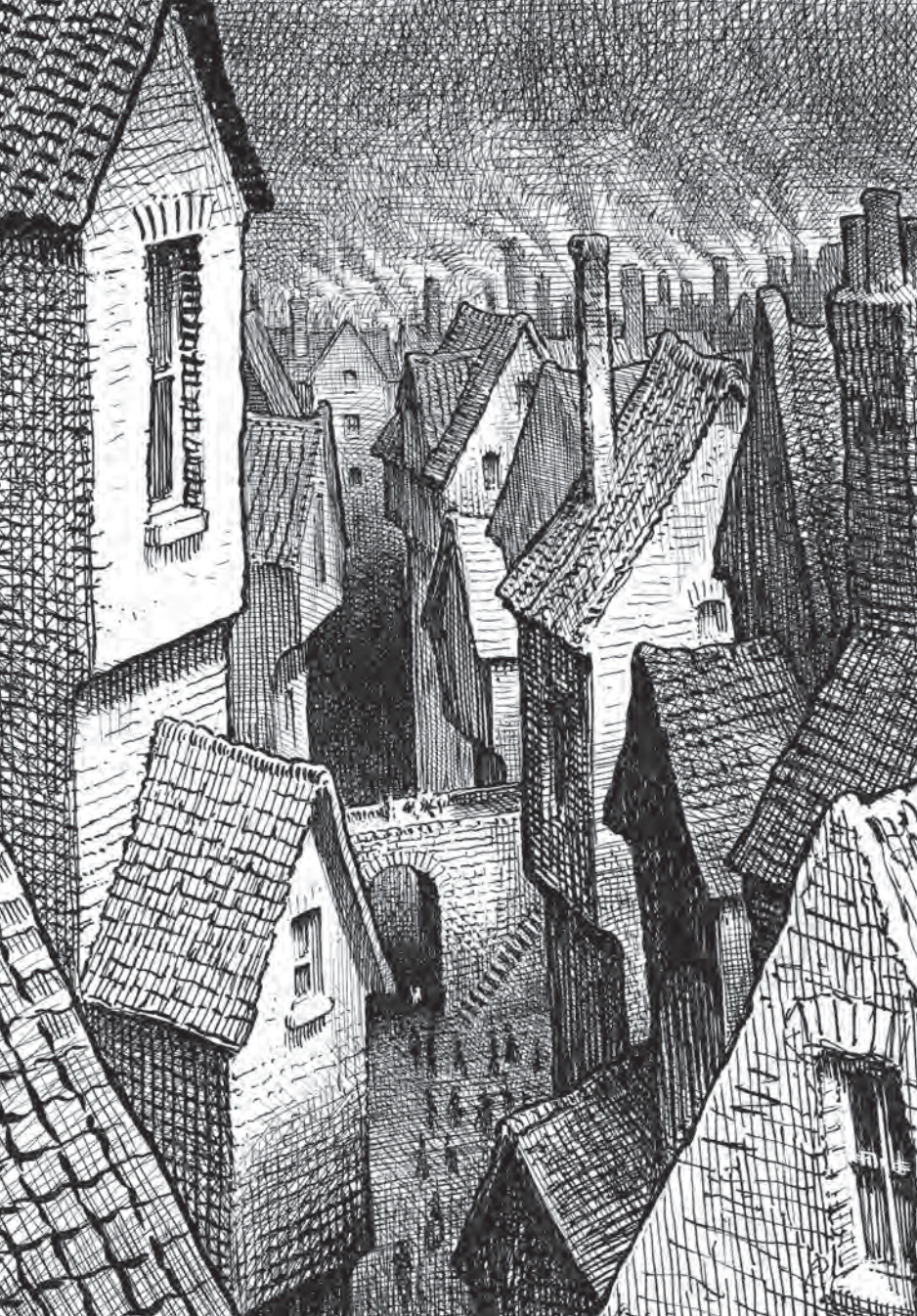
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To Mary





Chapter One

Pepper



In the middle of a Great Black City of smoke and soot and grime there once lived a girl called Clementine.

Here is a picture of the Great Black City and down there under that bridge, at the far end of that dark narrow street, is the house where Clementine lives. Do you see it?

Clementine was an orphan and she lived in that tall narrow house with her Aunt and Uncle Grimble and a large white cat called

Gilbert. He was a rather special cat – in fact, he was an *extraordinary* cat, as we shall discover – and if you look again at the first picture you might spot him down under the bridge, as he walks along the road to that house down at the end. Let's follow him.

Outside the house he has stopped, and he peers into a dirty little window at the bottom of the wall, just above the pavement. What does he see?

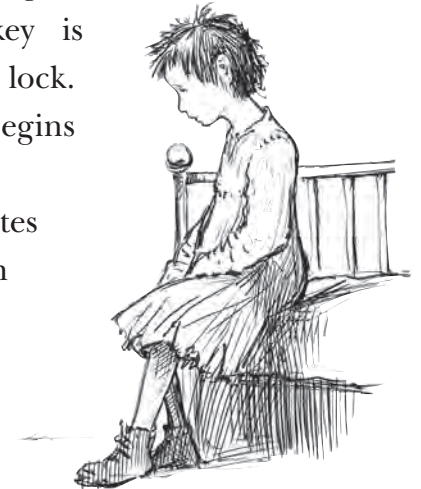
He sees Clementine, sitting on the edge of her bed (for the dark and dingy cellar beyond that window is actually her bedroom). She has scruffy short



hair and wears a raggedy dress and shoes that are pretty much worn out.

And now she jumps up! She can hear the heavy clump of her aunt's footsteps descending the cellar stairs, and then the jingle of a large bunch of keys, as if a gaoler were lifting them from a belt. A key is slotted into the lock. The door handle begins to turn . . .

Clementine bites her lip. She lives in mortal fear of her terrible aunt . . .





Aunt Vermilia always wore black. And because of her poor eyesight she wore spectacles with such thick lenses her eyes looked enormous and appeared to jump out of her head. Clementine thought she looked like a large, fat beetle. Her Uncle Rufus had a very large mouth and lots of teeth, and Clementine thought *he* looked rather like a crocodile.

Would you like an aunt and uncle like these two?

No, neither would I.

And though looks can sometimes be deceptive, in this case they're not. These two were fiends. They were about as wicked and cruel as you could get. Uncle Rufus would

sometimes beat Clementine with his heavy walking stick, while Aunt Vermilia often caught her by the ears and shook her head so violently it was a wonder her ears didn't come off! They were certainly stretched. At least, they *looked* stretched.



Anyway, stretched or not, it was a horrible thing to do. Grabbing someone by the ear was about the meanest, cruellest thing Aunt Vermilia could think of doing to anyone – which just shows you what sort of person she was! And Clementine certainly didn't deserve it; she was not a naughty child. Not really. No more naughty than any child *ought* to be.

Though she did once 'accidentally' sprinkle a little pepper on their porridge.



Quite a lot of pepper actually.

But my goodness, they deserved it!

She was punished, of course. But then Clementine was *always* punished – whether she did anything bad or not. The slightest mistake would provoke an alarming outburst. Like accidentally dropping a single pea. And since it was she who did all the chores around the house – the cooking, the cleaning and all the washing up – she was bound to make the odd mistake.

She was even punished for things that were not her fault. If anything went missing in that house – or was broken or cracked or

spilt or torn or spoilt – it was *always* blamed on Clementine (though it was very rarely her fault) and she was *always* punished.

Is it any wonder that she bit her lip in trepidation at the sound of her aunt's footsteps descending the cellar stairs?

And is it any wonder that she was sometimes driven to play little tricks on her wicked aunt and uncle? If she was going to be punished *anyway*, she thought, she may as well do something worth being punished for! And jolly good luck to her, I say.

I wonder why Clementine's Aunt and Uncle were so nasty? Perhaps they had had a horrible time when they were young?

'Little monster!' her Aunt Vermilia would scream. Or, 'Ogre!' Or, 'Vile little beast!'



And her Uncle Rufus would growl, ‘Devil!’, ‘Demon!’ and ‘Rogue!’

All words that suited *them* far more than they suited Clementine. They hardly ever called her by her name. And when they did, they never called her Clementine. Do you know what they called her? They called her Oiya, which wasn’t really a name at all, but came from them shouting, ‘Oi, you!’ whenever they wanted her. I suspect they didn’t even know her real name *was* Clementine, which was odd.

But then neither did Clementine, which was odder.

