

Prologue

London, August 31, 1888

As the door crashed closed behind her, Polly Nichols blinked into the wet dark night. Liquor warmed her belly and dulled her mind, and the sounds emanating from the Frying Pan Public House aggravated her. Raucous laughter, drunken singing to an out-of-tune piano, men's hoots and hollers at the dance girls added to Polly's sense of rejection.

The dreary rain of the last two days had finally ceased, but the cobblestones gleamed slick, puddled with mud, and splotted with excrement from dray horses that carted the local farriers and tradesmen through Whitechapel. She drew in a deep breath, grateful for the stillness in the black sky. The thunder and lightning of the previous night had set her nerves on edge. If it stormed tonight, she'd be in trouble for she had no doss money, no bed for the night. But she would get the 8d before too long. After all, she wore a lovely new bonnet and it was only 12:30 a.m.

Straightening the black straw hat trimmed in matching velvet, she pulled the collar of a faded auburn Ulster close around her neck and fastened its top button. Then she stepped down from the curb and away from the gaiety of the pub and her so-called friends. From time to time she lifted the skirt of a linsey frock to avoid the deeper troughs in the street. Spring-sided men's boots with steel tips on the heel, gave her feet some protection from the wet and afforded her a safe tread.

"Cor! Can't slip in this 'orrible muck 'n ruin me new tam." She spoke aloud to the lamppost on the corner of Thrawl Street and Brick Lane. Wisps of fog drifted up from

the cooling pavement and combined with gin to cloud her vision. She could almost hear the breeze stir the mist that rose in the desolate streets.

Making her way to Whitechapel Road, Polly's heels struck the pavement with a metallic rhythm. She hummed a makeshift tune to the sound. Something caused her to stop--footsteps--echoing her own. She turned as a figure stepped out from an alleyway. A dark-haired man, slight of build and fashionably dressed in a navy blue frock coat, silk necktie, and lavender gloves approached. An unexpected prickle of fear crept up her back, but she shook it off and moved to greet the gentleman. She could not pass up the chance to earn her 8d.

Polly curled her lips in a tiny smile, not wanting the customer to see that five of her front teeth were missing. But before she could utter a word, he had turned and disappeared in the gloom.

"'ere nah, off wiv yer then, yer bloody sod." She spat.

A wave of dizziness suddenly overtook her, and she grabbed for the lamppost to keep from falling. Then she staggered east down Whitechapel Road. When she reached Buck's Row she faltered. Along the narrow, cobbled street, tenement houses lined one side, while grim and disreputable-looking warehouses loomed down from the other. Polly squinted at the scarcely legible sign on one of the buildings: Schneider's Cap Factory. She giggled and patted her new hat.

A noise caused her to spin around, and the motion made her queasy. "Who's that? Why don't yer come to Polly, dearie?" She hiccupped and swayed on her feet. "Gawd, I'm weary. Jest need sum sleep, I do." She closed her eyes and nearly dozed standing up when another sudden noise jolted her. Footsteps again, this time soft and squishy on the wet macadam.

"Wut's with you, ol' girl?" Polly muttered to herself. At that moment a hand touched her shoulder and she whirled around. As she recognized the handsome stranger her body relaxed. "So yer back then?" Polly smiled her gap-toothed smile, ready to exchange light banter before sexual favors. But the words barely left her lips as a knife sliced through her neck from ear to ear. She didn't feel its sharp edge, but she had seen the glint of the blade arcing in front of her face... once, twice... the second time drooling blood--blood that appeared black in the yellow gaslight. Her blood. She felt no pain, but her throat filled with a viscous, pulpy sap, which she kept swallowing until she couldn't keep up with the flow. Her mouth moved in silent terror. Hot liquid ran down her legs now, soiling her clothes... the only clothes she owned. A terrible sadness came over her and tears ran uncontrollably down her cheeks.

The man stepped back and she reached for him. Her vision dimmed, outer edges growing dark; she viewed the street as a vignette, its picture shrinking and fading with each passing second. Her knees wobbled and buckled, her spine softened, no longer able to support her sagging weight. She felt weary, so very weary. Maybe she would shut her eyes for a little while... just for a little while.

* * *

London Times
September 1, 1888
"Another Murder in Whitechapel"

Another murder of the foulest kind was committed in the neighbourhood of Whitechapel in the early hours of yesterday morning, but by whom and with what motive is at present a complete mystery. At a quarter to 4 o'clock Police-constable Neill, 97J, when in Buck's-row, Whitechapel, came upon the body of a woman lying on

a part of the footway, and on stooping to raise her up in the belief that she was drunk, he discovered that her throat was cut almost from ear to ear. She was dead but still warm. He procured assistance and at once sent to the station for a doctor.

Dr. Llewellyn of Whitechapel-road, whose surgery is not above 300 yards from the spot where the woman lay, was aroused, and, at the solicitation of a constable, dressed and went at once to the scene. He inspected the body at the place where it was found and pronounced the woman dead. He made a hasty examination and then discovered that, besides the gash across the throat, the woman had terrible wounds in the abdomen. The police ambulance from the Bethnal-green Station having arrived, the body was removed there. A further examination showed the horrible nature of the crime, there being other fearful cuts and gashes, and one of which was sufficient to cause death apart from the wounds across the throat. . .