

For the first ten years of my life I had nothing. Nothing at all in the world. And when you've got nothing in the world, you've got nothing in the world to lose. Apart from your life, of course... and I was ready to take the risk rather than do nothing. I was ready to risk anything. I was ready to risk losing life itself.

But then, surprisingly, something special came into my possession. I also acquired something that no one could ever take away. I learned to read. A new world opened up to me... and I uncovered a secret beyond my dreams. For the first time I glimpsed light, colour and truth in a dark, dismal, diseased age.

There was a time when it was dangerous to be a child. There was a time when no one dared tell their story. Now is the time to tell mine.

Cephas Catchpole

Cephas Catchpole

Cephas Catchpole, along with hundreds of other orphaned children, was just like Robert Blincoe (born around 1792 and thought to be the inspiration for Dickens's *Oliver Twist*).



By 1796 (that special year for medicine), Robert was living in a workhouse, with the fate of his parents unknown. At the age of only six, he was sent to work as a chimney boy, an assistant of a chimney sweeper, and his grim future seemed sealed. Cephas's story begins in very similar circumstances. Hope was all they had to cling to... it didn't let them down.





‘No man dared to count his children as his own
until they had had the disease (smallpox).’

Comte de la Condamine
(18th century mathematician and scientist)





‘The havoc of the Plague visited our shores only once or twice within living memory; but the smallpox was always present, filling the churchyards with corpses.’

Thomas Macaulay, History of England, 1848





Early 1800s

----- *Chapter 1* -----



eing dead came as a terrible surprise. At first I assumed the room was blacker and colder than ever – until I opened my eyes and stirred... finding myself trapped inside a coffin. It didn't dawn on me that was my fate – lying, stunned as I was, in such solid darkness. The shock alone was enough to kill me when the penny finally dropped. Not that I had a penny to drop, never having owned a thing, let alone a coffin. And now, to crown it all,

it seemed I was declared dead, buried and pitifully extinct.

I had never imagined what it was like to be laid to rest in a grave. Not that there was time to dwell on such things, as I now had to face the stark truth that I would, indeed, be very dead very soon if I didn't get out very fast. My prospects did not look good – but they never had, at just ten years old and a penniless orphan, now with the added misfortune of being buried as a corpse. That was when it finally dawned on me that things could never get any worse. Little did I know they were about to.

At first I thought I was lying on a wooden floor at the dead of night, for I could only be sure of four things: my bed was very hard, I was freezing cold, I couldn't see a thing and I had a thumping headache. And that, for many minutes or maybe hours, was all I knew – as I drifted in and out of weird dreams.

Two distinct smells dragged me from sleep. One I knew only too well: soot. It was ingrained in my face, hair and often my throat – as with most of us chimney-sweep boys. The other smell was far sweeter; a flower. It wasn't from an expensive wreath of lilies but from some well-meaning soul who

must have pushed a rose between my hands placed across my chest. For that was now all I could feel – thorns digging into my thumbs. That was what roused me to become fully awake and aware of the awful truth. That's when I lifted my head, cracked it on wood... and screamed like never before.

My shriek bounced back and filled the box in which I lay. That's when I knew I was buried in the earth, for the sound crashed back with such intensity – it had nowhere to escape. Beyond the wood was silent, solid oblivion. My entire world was solid – solid black and solid silence. The stale air seemed solid, too – closing in, like a slab pushing down on my face. So my own hands pushed upwards... pressing on the flimsy lid and clawing at the cheap timber, but it was useless. It just made me breathless and jabbed splinters under my sooty fingernails. I was completely helpless and my predicament hopeless. I was sure I'd never see daylight nor feel the sun on my face again. There was nothing I could do apart from weep. My short life was over and of all the ways it could end, why ever did it have to be like this?



The misty moon smeared its smoky light over the moss-clad church roof. Beyond the tower no glimmer reached the graveyard at all, hiding as it did behind its high railings and chained iron gates. An icy crust crept over rows of higgledy-piggledy gravestones; jutting, toppling and crumbling like scurried teeth.

A bell in the tower clanged. A drunken fleshmonger staggering home in bloodied apron groped his way along the railings, grunting and trying unsuccessfully to whistle a tune. A horse's hooves clip-clopped over cobbles, pulling its clattering cart towards the slumbering city. An owl hooted from a desolate tree where frosty twigs poked through the mist, like clasping claws. Then silence. Deathly still. Nothing.

The first thud thumped through the night, as a spade struck mud. Two shadowy shapes stirred beneath a flickering lantern. One bent low to scrape at the ground.

'Keep digging,' he growled, 'And get that sack ready. It's a fresh mound. No headstone. Buried today, I shouldn't wonder.'

The other man put down the lantern. 'It might have the pox. Cover yer face.'

They pulled rags over their noses and tied them tightly behind their heads, before lifting their spades once more and stabbing them into the earth. Below the frozen surface, the soil was soft and loose – as a body had been buried only that morning.

A live body, as it turned out.

A spade came down with a crack. ‘It’s the coffin. We’ve got it.’

The lantern spilled its pale light into the hole.

‘Ssh! Don’t move. Keep still.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I heard a noise. It sounded like the gate.’

They dived behind a slab, throwing a sack over their lantern. Its wick fizzed and the sack smouldered. A night watchman peered into the darkness, his beady eyes on the lookout for nocturnal body-snatchers. Fresh graves had recently been dug open and bodies taken away. Midnight robbers unscrewed gold rings from bony fingers inside coffins. But lately there was another prize. A body could fetch a good price if you knew where to sell it. Surgeons in the city would pay well for a human body to dissect in anatomy lessons. A young fresh corpse was ideal. No questions asked.

The watchman shone his lamp across the headstones before turning back to cross the cobbles, his footsteps swallowed by the night. The owl swooped silently, skimming a yew hedge before screeching from the tower, as the two men emerged in a swirl of cloudy breath. They dug the remaining soil from the coffin and scraped its rough wood bare. Neither heard the tapping from the other side of the lid. Instead, they held their breath as the axe swung above their heads and glinted in a drizzle of moonlight. The blade came down with a crack and split the lid in two. In the glow of the lantern, they glimpsed a face staring up at them. A white face smudged with soot – and eyes that stared up in horror... just as the moon peeped through the swirling mist.

