

# THE EIGHTH CIRCLE OF HELL

The Eighth Circle of Hell

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# THE EIGHTH CIRCLE OF HELL

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## CHAPTER 1

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*“In my experience, little girls who beg for mercy seldom deserve it.”*

*Elizabeth sees his mouth moving, sees it framing the words – those words. She hears them inside her head, filling it, creeping through her body; through her arms, her legs, turning them to ice.*

*His hands lift and reach out towards her, overpowering, unstoppable. She wants to beg him for mercy, to beg him not to do it, but the undeserved words gag in her throat. She tries to turn, tries to push him away but her leaden limbs refuse to heed the shrieking, shrieking screams of her brain. Then two more people are there, with their smiling, laughing faces – a man and a woman. They catch her arms and hold her fast as he smiles the very smile of the Fiend, and reaches down for her.*

“Elizabeth Wilson has lived in workhouses since she was a girl of fifteen, Mr and Mrs Fox.”

The Master of the Knaresborough Union Workhouse smiled benignly as he pushed open the door to his private office.

“Which amounts to forty-five years in total, barring a few months she had as a pauper apprentice. She had, let me see, thirteen years at the Starbeck Workhouse before it closed and then the rest here, at the Knaresborough Union. But in all that time, I believe you are the first visitors she’s ever had. Well perhaps not; I’m told there was one other but that was many years ago and it all came to naught.

Please, take a seat. I’ve asked that one of the better pauper girls brings us some tea and then I’ll have Elizabeth fetched from the infirmary.”

The warm, lilting Geordie accent tempered his otherwise austere appearance.

The Master’s office was very much like the man himself; large and ascetic but softened here and there by a few more comfortable furnishings. One of these was a pair of plump, buttoned leather

settees and Atticus and Lucie Fox sank obediently onto the nearest of them while the Master settled into its mirror twin, separated from them by a low and highly polished coffee table.

He regarded them inquisitively for a moment, like an angel at the Gates of Paradise, and smiled once again.

“Are you relatives of Elizabeth, do you mind me asking?”

Atticus shook his head.

“I don’t mind at all, Mr Liddle and no, we aren’t relatives; Mrs Fox and I are privately-commissioned investigators. We’ve been asked to trace the whereabouts of Miss Wilson on behalf of our principal who is a close relative of hers.”

“I see. May I perhaps know the identity of your principal?”

“Certainly, he’s Dr Michael Roberts of Harrogate. Miss Wilson was taken in as a child by her uncle, Alfred Roberts, who is Dr Roberts’ grandfather.”

“Alfred Roberts the great philanthropist?”

Atticus nodded: “The very same.”

“Another of his great acts of kindness, no doubt,” said Liddle.

He sighed reflectively.

“There’s many a poor orphan or pauper child that Alfred Roberts sent on to a better life abroad or found a situation for in the houses of the gentry. I believe I read somewhere that he even had his own house built larger to take many of them in himself, until he could move them on.”

“That is true; it was a large annexe he added to the rear of his house. He took Miss Wilson in shortly after he had it built. That was many years ago when the second of her own parents, her mother, passed away. Alfred Roberts was her mother’s elder brother and her only living relative. Dr Roberts told us that she ran away around two years after his grandfather first took her in and, as we now know, eventually came to be here, in the union workhouse.”

Liddle nodded genially.

“I’ve heard a great deal of Dr Roberts. He’s recently become a firm acquaintance of Mr Manders, our Medical Officer here, and as I understand it, he’s a psychiatric doctor of no little renown.”

The leather of the settee creaked under him as he leaned forward, conspiratorially.

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“We have, as you might imagine, quite a number of lunatics and imbeciles here. Dr Roberts freely gives us any help and advice he can. He’s a philanthropist in the family tradition; there is no doubt of it.

What you tell me is fascinating though. I knew that Elizabeth had come to be in the workhouse under rather... mysterious circumstances shall we say, but until now I knew very few of the details. She’s obviously well educated and gentle-born, but Lizzie – Elizabeth, that is – never speaks of her life before she went to Starbeck. In fact, by all accounts, she rarely spoke at all for quite a number of years. Sister Lovell, the workhouse nurse, has known her the longest; in fact, it was she who finally got her to speak again.”

He was interrupted by a timid knock on the door. It opened and a tall, gangly girl appeared, blushing heavily and carrying a handsome, silver tea tray as if it might suddenly turn on her at any moment and bite.

“Curtsey, Sally,” the Master reminded her sharply.

“I’m sorry, Mr Liddle.”

The girl paused to curtsy clumsily and then slowly, with infinite care, set the tray down on the coffee table.

Liddle watched each of her movements intently, almost hungrily, as a cat watches a bird.

Then he said: “Thank you, Sally. Is M... is Sister Lovell fetching Lizzie?”

“Begging your pardon, sir but Lizzie needed to be changed before she could be fetched. She’s gone and wet herself again; made a right mess on the floor and no mistake.”

“Is she resisting the nurses?”

“Yes, sir, it took three of them to change her: Matthew and Tom and Edith. Edith said that Lizzie would rather stink and be sore all day than be washed and have fresh clothes.”

Liddle sighed and nodded wearily.

“Ah well, she keeps the women in the laundry house well employed I suppose. Please pass my compliments to Sister Lovell, Sally and ask that she be brisk.”

The girl hesitated.

“Please, Mr Liddle, Miss Lovell asked me to say that she needs me to help her with her rounds tonight and that she’s arranged for Edith

to bring you your warming-pan and polish your tables. She said that you would understand.”

The girl curtsied again and after a quick, nervous glance at Atticus and Lucie, she hurried, almost ran from the room.

Liddle frowned.

“I do declare that the last thing I need to see before I retire to bed is that old crone Edith in my bedroom. I shall be having nightmares tonight and that’s a fact. If the Master of a workhouse can’t choose a pretty pauper girl to bring him his night time bed warmer, what can he do?”

*They had finished with her at last. Please let it be over now, please, Lord Jesus. She felt dirty, sullied and used, just as she always felt after he had finished and dressed her again. She was a wicked, sinful girl and she had deserved it – needed it even. She deserved everything he did to her, just as she had deserved for her mama to go away. Her mama was in Heaven with Jesus and his angels. How could she have stayed to love a sinful child such as her? Why would her mama have been bothered with such a wicked, wicked creature as she?*

*She would shut it away. She would hide this memory along with all the others, festering away in that farthest, most remote part of her mind she kept especially for them.*

*Except that they wouldn’t lie still. Not these days. They wouldn’t stay there, far away, where they couldn’t hurt her. Every time she sensed that bitter, oily taste on her tongue, every time she saw eyes leering at her, hungering for her, every time she felt hands pulling at her clothes, the memories tried to come, tried to hurt her. She could hold them off by day, with busy and with the knife. But at night, when she could no longer be busy, they would come. They would spill into her dreams and turn them into nightmares. And it seemed that these days, there was no day and no night; that she had no knife and that her busy had gone.*

*She tasted once more the bitterness on her tongue and smelled it again in her nostrils. It was her medicine – her medicine for wicked girls. It helped. He always said that her mama would be pleased with her for taking it so well, with so little fuss. It helped her to be more... compliant to her punishments. Somehow, it seemed to make the punishments less real, almost as if they were*



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*happening to another little girl whose mama had gone away. And it helped her to hide away the memories when they had finished.*

“Aha, Miss Lovell, I would like to introduce Mr and Mrs Atticus Fox to you. They are privately-commissioned investigators no less, who have been engaged by the grandson of Elizabeth’s old guardian to trace her whereabouts. Have you fetched her?”

The shadow of what might have been panic flitted across the old, grim face of the nurse as rather stiffly, she wished them a good day, before turning again to the Master.

“I have, Mr Liddle; Lizzie is waiting outside in your vestibule. I’ve taken the liberty of giving her a small dose of chloral hydrate to settle her down a degree.”

The Master nodded sagely.

“That was very sensible, Mary. That chloral hydrate of yours is a godsend and we don’t want to distress her any more than we need. Now, please, sit down and pour the tea; Elizabeth may have some with us too, as a special treat for her. Mr and Mrs Fox have some questions they would like to put to you about her whilst I fetch her in from the vestibule.”

*He had come for her.*

*Oh, Mama, please come for me first. Please take me with you to be with Jesus, to be an angel like you. Don’t let him take me. I don’t mean to be wicked, I really don’t. Please believe me. Please ask Jesus not to let him take me away to his gentleman friends.*

*A single memory: A ring of laughing, jeering faces, with strangely disembodied voices, and of hands touching her, feeling her, escaped from its secret place and seared across her mind. There again was the bitter, oily taste in her mouth and there again, the hurt, deep down in her belly.*

## CHAPTER 2

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Seeing Elizabeth Wilson as she was shepherded gently into the Master's office was something of a shock for Atticus and Lucie Fox. They had been told by Dr Roberts, their principal, that by now she would be in her sixtieth year. But as Lucie remarked afterward, she looked at least twenty years older than that. She moved slowly and painfully, almost like an automaton, under her shapeless blue and grey workhouse dress, her skeletal hands clutched tightly before her as if in perpetual supplication. But the most striking, and by far the most distressing, thing about Elizabeth was her eyes. Clear blue and intense, they blazed out from her gaunt, lined face, hidden deep within the shadows of her shabby poke bonnet. As she stood cowering in the room, she seemed to stare right through them as if they were nothing more than unseen spectres between her and some far-distant horizon.

"There is no need to stand for a pauper woman, Mr Fox." Liddle chuckled good-naturedly at Atticus' faux-pas.

"On the contrary," Atticus replied, indignation stiffening his tone.

"Who sees with equal eye, as God of all, A hero perish, or a sparrow fall? Those are not my words, Mr Liddle; they are Alexander Pope's in, 'Essay on Man.'"

A charged silence stretched out between them.

"I'm no god, of course," Atticus continued, "But I strive hard to see with that same equal eye and I believe that manners and courtesy should too. Miss Wilson was born into a respectable family but even if she had not been, even if she was a sparrow and not a hero, she is still a woman, a woman of age, and I will still stand for her."

Without waiting for the Master's response he turned to Elizabeth.

"Good Afternoon, Miss Wilson, my name is Atticus Fox and this is my wife Mrs Fox. We are both delighted to make your acquaintance." His polite bow was followed by a heartbeat of silence

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as Lizzie's distant gaze slowly focussed onto him. It was transformed instantly into wretched terror. She began to cower and tremble like some tiny, whipped animal and her reply was husky and no more than a whisper.

"Please be merciful, sir," and then after a moment, "Jesus."

"There's no call for blasphemy, Wilson," Liddle rebuked her sharply.

"You're safe, Lizzie; you're quite safe. You're with me; you're with Mary."

The nurse stood and took Elizabeth's arm from the Master. Cradling the tightly-clasped hands in her own, she murmured reassuringly until gradually, Elizabeth's gaze slackened and dropped back once more into the infinity.

"Miss Wilson seems terrified of us, Sister Lovell," Lucie whispered, "Or at least of my husband. That's in spite of your sedative... chloral hydrate, did you say it was?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Mary Lovell pursed her lips and gently steered Elizabeth to a high-backed chair that stood next to Mr Liddle's large, mahogany bureau. She folded her into it and said:

"Lizzie has a very nervous disposition. She's timid, extremely timid, whenever she is around gentlemen."

"So I see."

Lucie watched curiously as Elizabeth began to rock gently to-and-fro, quietly singing a lullaby to herself under her breath. Her hands, trembling slightly and still balled tightly together, slid along the polished desktop until they came to rest next to a small pile of unopened letters which were pressed down by a handsome, silver paper-knife.

"What is her condition? I am a nurse myself, although retired now from the profession."

The taut lines on Sister Lovell's face seemed to soften a little at that. She crossed the room to perch on the edge of the settee next to the Master.

"Well, Mrs Fox, Lizzie suffers from profound nervous anxiety as you can see. Also, since shortly after her mama died, which happened when she was just thirteen years of age, she has had long and very deep periods of melancholy. They've increased over the years and

especially so over the eighteen-eighties. Now that she is old and senile, she seems depressive almost all of the time.”

Her eyes were suddenly shining in the light streaming in through the sashes of the windows.

“And how was she between her melancholic episodes?”

Lucie’s voice was keen with professional interest.

“She was employed in the workhouse bakery.”

“And excellent at it she was too,” added the Master, “She did the work of two ordinary paupers and did it thoroughly. I think it was because of her time at the Starbeck Workhouse. Most of the old, parish workhouses used to believe they were there just to provide relief from destitution, but at Starbeck they were very progressive; they laid great store in discouraging idleness by insisting on austerity and good, honest, hard work.

But Lizzie was never idle. Behind that shell she casts around herself, she is – or rather she was – a very diligent, industrious woman. She’s just an imbecile now of course.”

“Manic-depressive psychosis, do you suppose it was?” Lucie asked, ignoring Liddle’s final remark.

“The Medical Officer here thinks it might have been, but to speak plainly, I’ve made it my business to ask a proper psychiatrist about her and we don’t think so. There is no history of it in her family and she has never – well, hardly ever – shown any degree of recklessness. It was always quite the opposite actually; she was very controlled in everything she did.”

“Manic-depressive psychosis is a profound disorder of the mind,” Lucie explained in response to her husband’s quizzical look. “It causes the sufferer to be alternately depressed and manically euphoric, often, as Sister says, quite recklessly so. It appears to run in families.”

“But we don’t know her family history, do we, Sister Lovell?” Liddle interjected. “She never speaks of it; she never has.”

“But don’t forget that I knew her family, Mr Liddle, and I knew it well. Before I found the situation at the workhouse at Starbeck, I was employed for a while as Lizzie’s governess. Her mama, Beatrice Wilson, was the dearest, kindest lady you could possibly imagine. After she died, I was kept on by Lizzie’s uncle, Alfred Roberts, who

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had become her guardian, if you could call him that; he was no true guardian of hers.”

“But how could that be, Sister Lovell?” Atticus asked, puzzled. “Alfred Roberts was well known as a benefactor and friend to orphans and homeless children. Surely he didn’t neglect his own flesh and blood?”

The nurse glanced down, pressing her thin lips tightly together so that they almost seemed to disappear as she aligned the edge of the tea tray precisely with that of the table.

“No, Mr Fox, he didn’t neglect her; he didn’t neglect her at all. It was quite the opposite actually. Let me just say that I am very glad indeed that Alfred Roberts is now a feeble, frail old man.”

“That is a very harsh opinion to have of an old gentleman and a philanthropist,” Atticus exclaimed.

“He might well be old,” the nurse replied coldly, “But he was no gentleman and never, ever a philanthropist.”

“Do you know his grandson, Dr Michael Roberts?” Lucie asked, quickly moving the conversation on.

Sister Lovell hesitated for a moment.

“I resigned from the Roberts’ employ many years before Dr Michael was born. His father John Roberts was only a boy of twelve when I left.”

“And you were Miss Elizabeth’s governess you say?”

“For most of my time there, yes I was. Lizzie was three years – just three years, mark you – older than John when she fled to the workhouse. I left very soon after her.”

“Was she old enough to understand the principle that governs the workhouses, Sister Lovell?” Atticus asked. “I believe they call it the, ‘Principle of Less Eligibility.’ Conditions inside the workhouse should be much less comfortable than those outside, so that only the truly desperate would seek relief there.”

“Elizabeth Wilson was truly desperate, Mr Fox.”

Several seconds ticked by as they waited for someone to ask the inevitable question, and inevitably it was Atticus who asked it.

“What could possibly have made her so desperate that she would leave somewhere like Sessrum House to seek relief in a poor-law workhouse?”

Sister Lovell looked down and minutely shifted the tea tray once more.

“Lizzie despised the... punishments that Mr Roberts liked to mete out to the children in his so-called care.”

“I see. Well Dr Michael is the head of the house now and he would very much like for her to go back and to live there once again. He views the fact that she fled Sessrum House for a workhouse as nothing less than a stain on his family’s honour – an injustice in his words – that he very much wishes to repair. That’s why he commissioned us to find her. He believes that Miss Elizabeth deserves to live out the rest of her days in comfort and in grace.”

Sister Lovell threw a suddenly anxious look to the Master.

“I suppose it might be for the best, Mr Liddle, but she is so innocent, so very delicate.”

“That is all the more reason for her to leave the rigours of the workhouse then. Come now, Mary, surely you haven’t grown so attached to Elizabeth that you don’t wish her to live out her remaining days in style? I realise that with her mind as it is, she won’t fully appreciate the change in her circumstances, but surely living at Dr Roberts’ mansion would still be infinitely preferable to her spending the rest of her life in a workhouse infirmary? It would almost be like paradise on Earth for her there. Anyway, I have made up my mind. She’s an imbecile; she cannot work any longer and with this arrangement she’ll no longer be a burden on the parochial finances. Heaven knows, they’re stretched enough as it is. No, Mary, Lizzie shall leave for Harrogate today.”

The nurse seemed to vacillate still.

“She would be living with Mr Alfred’s grandson?” she demanded.

“And he will take good care of her? Will you promise me that?”

“I’m certain Dr Michael will take care of her wonderfully, Sister Lovell,” Lucie purred, her voice reassurance itself. “Alfred Roberts still lives at Sessrum to be sure, but in an annexe, quite separate to the main house.”

The old nurse shivered.

“Mr Liddle, may I accompany Lizzie to her new home? I feel I ought to help her to settle in there and get her used to her new surroundings.”

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Liddle looked enquiringly at the Foxes.

“I have no objection whatsoever Mr Liddle, and neither would Dr Roberts I’m sure,” Atticus confirmed. “In fact, he himself suggested that it would be a first-rate idea if someone were to come up with her to do exactly that.”

The Master grunted his assent. “Then the matter is settled and the parochial union can be grateful they’ve one less pauper to pay for in their infirmary.”