



LoveReading

**YOU LOVED YOUR LAST BOOK...
BUT WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO READ NEXT?**

Using our unique guidance tools, **LoveReading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Letters From Alice

Written by **Petrina Banfield**

Published by **Harper Element**

All text is Copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is brought to you by
LoveReading. Please print off and read at your leisure.

Letters *from* Alice

A tale of hardship and hope. A search for the truth.

Letters *from* Alice

PETRINA BANFIELD

H A R P E R
element

HarperElement
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperElement 2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

© Petrina Banfield 2018

Petrina Banfield asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record of this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-826470-3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the
prior written permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC C007454

This book is produced from independently certified FSC paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

Happy memories
SYLVIA ELLEN LOCKYER

NOTE TO READER

I was thirteen years old when I first discovered that my father spent his childhood in care. Until then he had never spoken to me about his past and, as children are so adept at doing, I somehow picked up that it was a subject to be tiptoed around, without ever having been told. The truth came out one Sunday afternoon after I plucked up the courage to ask for the names of my paternal grandparents, so that I could complete a genealogy project for school.

Perhaps he felt I'd reached an age of understanding because after a moment's hesitation he told me that he knew very little about his parents, who had died long before I was born. Even this snippet of information was fascinating to me and I listened eagerly as he told me about the grandmother I'd never met – a petite Irish woman who had experienced too much pain and not enough love. By the age of twenty-five she had given birth to five children.

The shadow cast by childhood trauma stretched far into the future though, and in 1941 three of her children were taken into care, including my father and his twin brother – the youngest, at six months old.

Ever since hearing my father's story I've been captivated by the idea of the corporate parent; society waiting with a safety net to cradle those most in need. For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to be part of that narrative. I finally applied to become a foster carer in 2006.

On my initial 'Skills to Foster' training course, the tutor told us that three fates awaited unwanted children of the distant past: death by exposure, prostitution or Christian adoption. We learned that homeless children and orphans in Britain were first 'boarded out' with foster carers in the latter part of the nineteenth century and that hospital almoners were the forerunners of modern social workers. But it was only in 2014, in trying to reassemble the scattered fragments of my father's childhood puzzle, that I learned more about the almoners' remarkable work.

I knew that Dad suffered with severe eczema as a child (he was separated from his twin at the age of five, his weeping wounds perhaps a physical manifestation of his sense of loss) and spent prolonged periods of time in hospital in London at some time during the Second World War, so I visited the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) and began my search there.

Not really knowing where to start, I put in a request for old files from the Royal Free Hospital and its associated hostels in London. Within half an hour, several boxes had arrived in the reading room. Excitedly, I started going through the first one and, beneath the envelopes filled with receipts and manila files tied up with string, I found a smaller box containing almoners' reports from the 1920s.

As I worked my way through the dusty papers I read about girls ‘very young, not more than sixteen or seventeen years old’, who had ‘fallen into trouble’ as a result of living in conditions that were ‘past belief ... involving very grave and unusual risks of infection’. As well as being pregnant, homeless and ‘turned adrift’ by their families, some of the poor girls were in agony as a result of a double infection of syphilis and gonorrhoea.

One almoner recorded that one of her patients, a girl suffering from gonorrhoea, was ‘one of six siblings who all slept in one bed, in a room like a cupboard, with no outer air’. Another young girl ‘lived over a stable with no access except by a ladder-like stair’.

On arrival at hospital many were ‘in a state of nervous and physical exhaustion, and of resentment requiring great tact and care in dealing with them. Some [were] put to bed, till the irritable condition of their nerves [was] soothed, and many of them [slept] for days ... some descend[ing] to the depths of despair [,] bringing them to the verge of insanity’.

As I leafed through the file of fragile papers, a small bundle of handwritten letters written by one of the almoners – here, I will refer to her as Alice – fell out from between the pages. Beautifully written in a gently sloping script of fading black ink, and without a trace of the toxic condemnation that awaited the girls in society at large, they showed the almoner reaching out to her contacts in the community in search of ‘well-disposed people’ who might find it in their hearts to take them in.

A picture of Alice began to emerge: a fiercely intelligent woman from a sheltered background, filled with a sense of

purpose and unafraid to challenge the conventions of the day. In *Letters From Alice*, Alice's character, her attitudes and motivations are drawn from the common experiences of women of her time and social station; she belongs to a generation of women emboldened by the progress of the Suffragette movement and ready to make their voices heard. Striding around some of the poorest parts of London in her ankle-length skirts, I imagined Alice immersed in a world of complex social problems, ones that resonate strongly with me as a foster carer today: homelessness and deprivation, incarceration, domestic violence, intoxication from opium and alcohol, and, inevitably, the neglect and deliberate abuse of children.

What follows is a retelling of the experiences of one of the girls (I will call her Charlotte) through the eyes of Alice, using the letters, almoners' reports and case files from the LMA as inspiration. Quotes have been lifted directly from the archive material, unless otherwise stated. Weather reports have been sourced from the Meteorological Office. Where the records are scant or incomplete, I have drawn on my research of the morals and expectations of society through the 1920s and my own imagination, to inject character into the disembodied voices in the reports and bring the stories to life on the page.

PROLOGUE

Unlike doctors and nurses [the almoner] is a newcomer in the hospital world, but she finds all the benefits of its traditions at her disposal. Whether the almoner is there or not, a tapestry is being woven by the work of the hospital, but it may be an incomplete piece of work and apt to unravel if she does not play her part in gathering up and connecting the broken threads.

*(The Hospital Almoner: A Brief Study of
Hospital Social Science in Great Britain, 1910)*

It was a little before seven o'clock in the evening on 17 April 1921 when twenty-eight-year-old almoner Alice Hudson summoned the police constable for help.

PC Hardwicke's heavy boots tramped over the icy pavements in the east London district of Bow, Alice leading the way a few steps ahead. The weather during early April had been milder than usual, but over the last few days the temperature had plummeted, a depression from Iceland bringing gales over the eastern coasts and snow showers to the capital.

Daylight was beginning to fade as they reached their destination: a two-storey boarding house flanked by a derelict pub and a paper merchants. Alice had stopped by to see Molly Rainham half an hour earlier through concern for the young mother's welfare, she later reported to the coroner. Despite knocking for several minutes and tapping on the frosted window pane, the only response had been an unidentifiable, plaintive bleat in the distance.

Hospital almoners were accustomed to a variety of reactions to their unannounced visits, but there was something strange about the silence echoing around the hall on the other side of Molly's front door; a ghostly stillness that had sent Alice hurrying to the local police station.

From the notes in the almoner's file back at the Royal Free Hospital, Alice knew that Molly may have been suffering from post-natal psychosis. According to reports she had initially coped well with motherhood, but seemingly overnight her demeanour had changed. With her husband on a military posting in Constantinople and no other family to speak of, Alice made a point of calling in on her patient whenever her schedule allowed.

'We need to break in,' the almoner insisted, as PC Hardwicke rapped again on the front door.

He was still tapping half a minute later as Alice scrabbled at the downstairs window and wrenched it upwards. Before the PC managed to reach the almoner, his long-tailed dark blue coat flapping behind him, she had already bunched the damp hem of her long skirt up in one hand and was clutching at the

PROLOGUE

window frame with the other. In one motion she crawled forwards and hauled herself over the sill, the bobby pivoting on his heels and averting his eyes behind her.

A hundred yards to the east, the bells of St Mary le Bow boomed the hour. As the policeman followed Alice through the window, a seagull cried out mournfully in the darkening sky above, a reminder to the onlookers that had begun to gather outside the small property of their proximity to the docks and the wide sea beyond.

The passageway was dark. Perhaps to soften the impact of a sudden intrusion, Alice and the PC slowed when they reached the top of the stairs, then exchanged glances. Besides an unpleasant smell, there was an undertone of something else in the air, something disturbing. With a grim expression, the bobby turned towards the master bedroom at the front of the house.

A few steps later he faltered, stopping so abruptly that Alice almost walked into the back of him. The groan that escaped him should have offered some warning of the scene awaiting her, but when Alice stepped forwards she gasped in horror. Inside the room on a bloodstained mattress, Molly was stretched out on her back, her eyes and mouth gaping. The sinews in her neck were taut, her powdered cheeks etched with the chalky deposits of dried-up tears.

It was Alice who reached the bed first. The emergency drills she had learned as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse assessing casualties during the war years came back to her instantly. She ran her eyes over Molly, methodically

checking for vital signs. Half a second later, she turned to the constable, gave a grim shake of her head then hurried past him into the hall.

The door to the small bedroom at the back of the house stood open. Alice hesitated in the doorway for a brief moment, then ran over to the cot by the window, where Molly's infant son lay. Bracing herself, she leaned over to feel the skin at the back of his neck. Her legs buckled then – it was warm to the touch. Had she been half an hour earlier in rousing the alarm, the deputy coroner for east London later reported to the inquest held in Stepney, the baby boy might have been saved.

The death of Molly and her son was the first in a series of shocking cases that Alice Hudson became involved in, one that marked a turning point in her career, redefining the way she viewed herself and the world around her. When Alice returned to the Royal Free Hospital on Gray's Inn Road and wrote up her report of the incident, she was unaware of the tangled threads that tied Molly to a case that rocked her above all others: the web of deception that began to unravel months later, on New Year's Eve, 1921.

CHAPTER ONE

The question of the abuse of voluntary hospitals is one of wide knowledge. It has led to the creation of the hospital almoner, and there is a great future in front of her ...

Students should be between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, and the more knowledge of the world and of general interests that they can bring to their training, which lasts at least eighteen months, the better.

(Pall Mall Gazette, 1915)

By the middle of the afternoon on 31 December 1921, Alice Hudson had ticked off almost all of the duties on her weekend list.

It was three degrees Celsius, the sort of weather that prescribed hot drinks and thick blankets, and the almoner might have spent the day huddled in front of the log fire in the nurses' home instead of trudging across the icy streets of east London, had it not been for the pile of urgent home visits weighing down the desk of her basement office.

Although December 1921 had been generally mild, Londoners shouldered frequent high winds and gales towards the

end of the month. Today, Saturday, there was a cloud of sulphur in the air, the sky stretching over the Thames as grey as the sediment lurking at its depths. Conditions were likely to worsen over the next few hours but, all being well, Alice would be back in her room before dark.

The signs were promising. It was 2.30 p.m. and she was already three calls down, with only one to go.

The almoner took hurried, lopsided steps along the pavement overlooking the river, a briefcase full of patient files bumping against her ankle-length cape. In the distance, the faint blue glow from the lamplighter's pole twinkled reflectively over the surface of the Thames as he worked his way, much earlier than usual, along Tower Bridge. Several children had walked unwittingly through the vapours into the frozen waters during the last terrible smog. The flickering lights glinting over the water offered at least some degree of reassurance for pedestrians.

Fifty-seven years old and possessed of an unruly beard, portly physique and a loud but undeniable charm, Frank Worthington strode ahead, smoking his ever-present pipe. A newly appointed board member of the Charity Organisation Society, or COS, Frank had shadowed Alice in the last fortnight, apparently to report back to the board on the benefits of the almoners' work.

Besides arranging financial assistance and practical support for patients in times of crisis, or improving their living conditions so that they were able to benefit from their hospital treatment, Alice was expected to identify those families with

the means to make a small contribution, thereby increasing the hospital's income and justifying the cost of her own salary.

Peering beneath the veneer of the family and making judgments about their financial situation while at the same time maintaining a friendly, trusting relationship was a tricky balancing act for the almoners, however, one that could easily swing out of kilter.

Some families fiercely resented the intrusion of home visits, particularly those that were unannounced. Alice quickly learned to brace herself against the inevitable shock on the faces of her subjects, the rising unpredictability that could beset any unannounced visit, the ever-present possibility of violence.

Not that it always helped to be mentally prepared. On one surprise home visit, Alice was pelted from an upstairs window with some foul-smelling, ominously yellow soggy rags. Another time, she lost her thumbnail in a ferociously slammed door.

According to the almoner's file on the last family they planned to visit, the Redbournes persistently claimed poverty, but were known to frequent several of the newly opened jazz clubs in the West End. While the question mark over their earnings was a matter that required further investigation, however, it wasn't the almoner's biggest concern.

The Redbourne family file was marked with an asterisk; a code to indicate to the team that theirs might be a case that warranted closer inspection.

When Alice's boss, Bess Campbell, had first visited the family in their small house in Dock Street, she later documented

that she had found the children home alone. Mrs Redbourne had staggered back arm-in-arm with one of her neighbours singing 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' at the top of her voice while the Lady Almoner conducted a conversation with one of her youngest through the letterbox.

There were five children in the family, three of whom had received treatment in the outpatients department for dysentery. It was a condition feared by parents across the city: the summer diarrhoea of 1911 claimed the lives of 32,000 babies under the age of one, the plethora of flies attracted by horse manure on the streets speeding up the transmission of disease. The Redbournes' youngest, a boy of around a year old named Henry, had fallen sick with pneumonia soon after recovering from his bout of dysentery. According to the physician who treated him, he had been lucky to survive.

As a porter on the railways, Mr George Redbourne earned a reasonable wage, one that, according to Miss Campbell, should have been sufficient to allow the family to contribute sixpence a week towards the cost of their medical treatment. A typical wage for someone like Mr Redbourne in the early 1920s was around thirty to forty shillings a week (in old money, there were twelve pennies in a shilling, and twenty shillings to a pound).

The Redbournes insisted that the rest of their income, after the eight shillings and sixpence a week they paid out in rent, was swallowed up by tram fares to and from work, payments to elderly parents and other essentials. So far, not a penny of the costs of the family's treatment had been recouped.

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble with nerves prevented Mrs Redbourne from working, or so she claimed, but she was a reluctant interviewee, and her word was not entirely trusted. The margin of the Redbournes' file was marked with the letters 'NF': the almoners' code for 'Not Friendly'. It was a practice taught in training, one that forewarned visiting staff to be on their guard.

Across the river, a barge billowed steam into the air. Frank stopped abruptly as a horse cantered past, its cart loaded with coal. 'Miss Hudson, you've made your point,' he said, tilting his head towards the briefcase. 'You're as capable as any man, I accept it. I just wish you'd give up your desire to become one.'

Alice stopped, resting the briefcase on the ground and shaking her hands to get the blood flowing again. Tentatively, she loosened the silk scarf she was wearing, wincing as she tucked the end inside her cape. A collection of scarves in assorted colours hung in Alice's wardrobe back in her room. She alternated them throughout the seasons to conceal the burn injury she sustained in the trench fire that had sent her home to England, the rough scars running across her left shoulder, up to the nape of her neck and over the back of her left hand.

'Don't worry, Frank,' came the curt reply. 'If ever I had such ambition, you are more than enough to contain it.' Frank chuckled and set off again through the resulting cloud of smoke, unburdened but for the folded umbrella he tapped on the ground in front of him.

Alice picked up pace, the bells of Southwark Cathedral jangling in time with her steps. As they neared Whitechapel,

walking the same streets stalked by Jack the Ripper a few decades earlier, they passed several tenements, silent but for the distant yowls of a stray dog. With shoeless children using stones for marbles on the icy pavements and coatless beggars huddling against crumbling walls, it was an area well known to the almoners.

Hurrying past the destitute with nothing to offer but a concerned smile must have been demoralising for a committed social reformer like Alice, but the almoners soon learned the difficult and humbling lesson that all social workers through the ages come to accept: you can't help everyone.

Frank slowed as they neared a warren of three-storied houses with overhanging eaves. The smoke rising from chimneys all along Dock Street would likely worsen the weather conditions, but at least offered the promise of a room warmed by a log fire.

Alice reached Frank a few doors away from their destination. The trail of acrid smoke he left in his wake caught in her throat and she gave a sudden cough. Frank stopped mid-pace, draped the handle of his umbrella over the crook of one arm and held out his other hand to take possession of the briefcase. 'May I?' he asked, pipe dangling from between his teeth. With a slow roll of her eyes, Alice relinquished the suitcase. Frank immediately stood aside, gesturing for her to take the lead with a flourish of his broom.

The Redbournes' rickety wooden gate gave a resentful moan on opening, the yard empty but for a skinny cat curled up inside an old cardboard box. Lifting its head, the creature eyed them sorrowfully and then gave a mournful yowl. Alice

CHAPTER ONE

crouched down, stroked its cold, velvety ears and whispered a soft hello.

The rug appeared out of the door without warning, just as Frank reached the front step. With a pitiful yelp he dropped both briefcase and broly and staggered backwards to the gate, flapping his hands madly at his hair and face. Seemingly oblivious to her visitors, the woman brandishing the rug continued with the task, shaking it violently, eyes and mouth pinched tight against the spiralling dust.

It was only when Alice rose to her feet that Mrs Redbourne noticed them.

‘Oh,’ she said, staring at them agog. Frank, doubled over and gasping as he clutched at the fence post for support, looked for all the world as if he’d just left the battlefield. Alice’s mouth twitched as if stifling a giggle. A movement of the curtain at next door’s window, and the appearance of an elderly woman with curly grey hair on the other side of the glass, was a reminder of the need for discretion.

‘I am sorry to trouble you, Mrs Redbourne,’ Alice said softly. The cat raised itself and coiled her ankles in a figure of eight, disappearing beneath the hem of her skirt and reappearing at intervals. A passer-by stopped outside the house. Hat in hand, the elderly gentleman stared unabashedly at their small party. Alice lowered her voice still further. ‘We are from the Royal Free Hospital. Would you mind if we came in?’

Mrs Redbourne gave Alice a long look. The files back at the Royal Free stated that she was in her early forties, but her stern expression made her appear much older. Her hair had been

combed into a grid-like pattern, each square grey tress curled, secured with pins and kept in place with a dark scarf. The rim of the scarf pulled tightly on the lined skin around her forehead, rendering her pink-rimmed eyes severe. She began to work her mouth as if chewing and then she said: 'We're in the middle of things just now.'

'We shan't take much of your time. We would like to check a few facts with you, and leave you with some information about our subscription scheme.'

The woman's face contorted further. 'That won't be necessary. We have all the information we need, thank you very much.' Steadfastly blocking their entrance with her wide girth, she folded the rug against the apron she wore like a shield, her lips stretched into a thin line.

Alice opened her mouth to speak. Before she managed to say a word, however, Frank, recomposed, grabbed his umbrella and nudged it against her skirt, half-pointing, half-thrusting it into the hall. 'If you'd be so kind, Madam,' he said, easing Alice aside with a fractional movement of his wrist. The expression on Mrs Redbourne's face suggested that she wasn't going anywhere, but a few moments later the woman flattened herself against the open door and let them through.

Alice met Frank's satisfied look with another curt nod. She followed him into the hall, hovering at the open door for a fraction of a second before moving aside to allow Mrs Redbourne to close it behind them.

The almoner ran her eyes around the Redbournes' hall. It was bright and clear of debris, the floor recently swept. There

was a darkened rectangle where a rug must have been, the rest of the space dominated by a large coach pam.

In the front room, several logs glowed brightly in the fireplace. A pot of water bubbled away over the flames, children of varying ages playing close by. The high number of children arriving at hospital with severe burns and scalds meant that Alice frequently offered strong words of advice about the use of fireguards. It was one of the warnings that often fell on deaf ears, probably because finding the money for a guard was low down on the list of priorities for families who were worried about where their next meal might come from.

After eleven months in the post, the almoner was at least well practised in running through all of the necessary checks she needed to ensure that the financial information provided matched the family's apparent means. She had also been trained to note down any evidence of harm to the children, bruising to the skin and other tell-tale signs of neglect, as well as any other issues that might negatively impact on a patient's health. The rudimentary medical knowledge she had gained as a nurse with the VAD in a field hospital in Belgium helped her to discriminate between those injuries resulting from natural rough play and those of a more sinister origin.

The British Red Cross, recognising that the VADs had much to offer on their return to England, had offered scholarships to those willing to train as hospital almoners. Sent home after being injured from the fire resulting from the blast of a mortar bomb, and passionate about improving the living standards of the ordinary working people, Alice had jumped at the chance.

Back in 1916, when she had first arrived at the casualty clearing station in Belgium, unqualified and with no medical experience, she had only been allowed to carry out the most menial of chores, like cleaning floors and swilling out bedpans. The qualified nurses from Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), already battling for professional recognition, had resented the onslaught of hundreds of untrained women from middle-class homes. Inevitably, the grottiest of chores were directed towards the new arrivals.

Alice uncomplainingly cleaned up the stinking, putrid dead skin that had been scraped from the feet of soldiers suffering from trench foot. She swept up the discarded fragments of bloodstained uniform that nurses had pulled from infected wounds. She stoically hid her blushes when confronted with her first glimpse of a naked male.

Gradually the qualified staff recognised Alice's dedication. As their attitude towards her softened and their appreciation grew, she was granted closer contact with injured soldiers. Like many of her contemporaries plunged into the aftermath of battle, she discovered that she possessed a natural ability to console. It wasn't unheard of for Alice and the other VADs to lower themselves into the trenches to comfort dying soldiers, ignoring the roar of cannon fire and the smell of charred flesh. Mothers back in England found comfort in knowing that someone gentle had held their sons as they passed away.

Alice wrinkled her nose. There was a faint smell of drains, sour nicotine and something like old lard in the air – sometimes the dank smell inside the homes she visited was enough

to make her retch – but the house was clean enough. The Redbourne children were whey-faced and snuffly with colds but there was no sign of fever or the dreaded influenza virus that had driven so many people to the Royal Free that winter. All of them were clothed and there was no sign of rickets among them. Neither were any of them possessed of that shrunk, unhealthy appearance that so worried the almoners whenever they came across it.

A small boy lay languidly on his tummy under a wooden clothes horse covered in linen cloth nappies and, incongruously, a white silk chemise. About a year or so old, his appearance was consistent with the description of Henry recorded in the Redbournes' hospital file. Alice's eyes lingered on his damp, flushed cheeks. With his head on his forearms, he looked close to dropping off, but healthy enough otherwise.

An older girl of around twelve years old was kneeling nearby, trying to field off blows from another young boy who was standing behind her. Around four years old, he alternated between slapping the top of her head and grabbing handfuls of her hair. He giggled when she pulled him over her shoulder and onto her lap, but then lashed out, slapping her in the eye when she tickled his midriff.

In light of what was to come, the child's behaviour might have set some alarm bells ringing. As it was, the overall impression offered was one of need, but not destitution, or something graver. And yet somehow there was enough money left at the end of the week to finance nights out in the West End, and, so it seemed, luxury lingerie.

Alice scanned the room for a second time. In the corner, an older girl was sitting on a small sofa with her face turned towards the window. A sickly-looking toddler was perched on her knee. The conversation between Mrs Redbourne and Frank became increasingly loud and animated. By distracting the homeowner with his extravagant gestures, Frank was offering Alice the opportunity to carry out an inspection unhampered; one of the oft-used subterfuges employed by the almoners.

Even with the dust motes clinging to his beard, Frank looked fantastically conspicuous in the room. Alice and her colleagues had initially been perplexed at the idea of a man turning up whenever he felt like it to observe them at work, but his humour had put them quickly at ease. Beneath his buffoonery lurked a sharp mind and keen intuition, something he appeared keen to keep under wraps.

Quietly, Alice edged past the pair into the room. Frank shifted his weight subtly from one foot to the other to aid her passage. A ripple of interest at the arrival of yet another stranger rolled over the children. The young boy who was in the process of pinching his older sister sprang to his feet and walked over to her. 'Hello,' Alice said softly, crouching down in front of him. 'What's your name then?'

'Jack,' the boy answered and began fiddling with the sleeve of Alice's cape. 'You one of them busybodies?'

The almoner smiled then removed her hat and rested it on one knee, instantly softening her features. Some of Alice's nursing colleagues were beginning to experiment with cosmetics, something that would have been considered vulgar before the

CHAPTER ONE

war. When readying themselves for a night out, they would cajole her into darkening her lashes with a mixture of crushed charcoal and Vaseline, the more exuberant characters outlining their eyes in a dramatic sweep. Alice generally went make-up free when on duty, taming her long brown curls in a tight chignon at the back of her head. It was a style that gave her square jaw and high forehead prominence over her softest feature: her large, thickly lashed brown eyes. The resulting rather prim look came in useful when dealing with the least cooperative of patients. ‘Erm, I suppose some might say so.’

‘Mummy usually sends you lot packing.’

His older sister shifted around and gave a shake of her head. Alice pressed her lips together, eyes shining. ‘And who is this?’ she asked, kneeling in front of the young boy who was sitting on his older sister’s lap, bare knees dangling beneath a worn blanket. About two years old, the child regarded her shyly and buried his face in his sister’s chest. The latter planted a brief kiss on top of his hair. When she pulled away, her eyes remained downcast. The logs crackled in the grate as Alice stilled, waiting for an answer.

The girl, though wearing a morose expression, was pretty. Her cheeks were plump and prominent despite the thinness of her wrists, her eyes a feline green. After a few moments she met Alice’s gaze. ‘John,’ she mumbled, regarding the almoner with the sort of suspicion that anyone involved in social work quickly becomes accustomed to.

‘Hello, John,’ Alice said, with a brief touch to his knee. She looked up at his sister. ‘And you are?’

‘That’s Charlotte,’ Jack offered, stealing Alice’s hat from her knee and planting it lopsided on his own head. ‘She’s trouble, Mum says. Him’s Henry,’ he added, pointing to the young boy almost asleep on the floor. ‘And Elsa’s over there.’ The young girl sitting next to Henry chewed her lip and regarded Alice from beneath lowered lashes. Charlotte rolled her eyes and glared.

The tell-tale signs of a scabies infestation were visible along John’s forearm. Track-like burrows ran around his wrist where a mite had tunneled into the skin, the tiny black dots of faecal matter visible around an angry rash. It was something Alice and the other VADs had often seen in the field hospitals; soldiers driven half-mad by the intense, irrepressible itch. The entire family would need to be treated with benzyl benzoate emulsion. ‘Not at school, Charlotte?’ Alice asked, in a precise but friendly tone.

It was a question designed to engage, rather than a genuine enquiry. The almoner had been taught specific interviewing strategies in training that helped her to disguise carefully planned interviews as casual chats, thereby gaining valuable insight into the living conditions of her patients: their relationships, finances, thoughts and fears. By examining individuals in the context of their social setting she was able to identify issues that might be impacting negatively on their health. Practical help honed to individual needs could then be offered, improving outcomes and the chances of a good recovery.

One way to encourage an interviewee to relax was to start a conversation with questions that were most easily answered,

CHAPTER ONE

in much the same way as the devisers of written exams open with a problem easily solved. Since patients almost universally enjoyed talking about themselves, she learned that a readiness to listen, a keen interest in people and a sincere desire to help were all that was needed to encourage loose tongues.

‘I’m fifteen,’ the girl said, sounding offended. ‘I left ages ago.’

Alice nodded. ‘So are you working outside of the home now?’ The almoners knew it wasn’t unusual for older children to take a job so that they could contribute towards the family purse, even skipping school to do so. The income generated was often kept under wraps by families being assessed. Alice had been taught to be thorough in her questioning to uncover a true picture of a family’s finances.

‘Not really,’ Charlotte answered quickly. Her thin chilblained fingers worked continuously at the blanket on her brother’s lap, as if she had more to say. Alice waited, but the girl’s eyes flicked over to her mother and then her expression suddenly closed down. Her shoulders rounded further away so that the child on her lap wobbled and almost lost balance until she reached out and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Alice pressed her lips together, rescued her hat and rose to her feet. Over by the door, Frank’s charms were working a treat, Mrs Redbourne smiling up at him coyly. She barely seemed to notice when Alice slipped past. Behind her, Charlotte sat quietly, eyes watchful.

In the hallway, Alice hesitated. She stood in solitary silence for a few seconds, head cocked as if listening. After a moment

she turned sideways to squeeze past the pram and then moved towards a closed door at the end of the hall. A soft thump stopped her in her tracks. There was a creaking sound, and then the door gave way, a pair of eyes peering through the crack.

After a short pause in which no one moved, the door was opened to reveal a fleshy, puffy-eyed man with a glossy sheen across his forehead. Alice strode towards him, thrust out her hand and smiled, as if a meeting had been planned between them. 'You must be Mr Redbourne?' she said. 'Alice Hudson. Pleased to meet you.'

The man looked down at her and passed his tongue over his lips, then took her proffered hand. 'You'll be from the hospital,' he said in an uncertain voice. 'The wife could do without the added pressure,' he added, when Alice confirmed her occupation. 'We do what we can, but you can't expect us to give what we don't have.'

He followed her to the living room, but when his wife caught sight of him she shooed him away with her hand. 'I thought you were at the market, George? Get going will yer, there's things we need.' Mr Redbourne pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, took one into his mouth using his teeth, then, without another word, slipped out of the house.

When the front door clicked to a close, Alice entered the room he had just vacated. The back parlour was a dark room with a single bed in the centre, the wooden base held up by a pile of bricks at each corner. There was a bite to the air, the room colder than the street outside. A dozen shirts hung from a rope stretched diagonally across it, one end caught between

CHAPTER ONE

the slightly open window and the other wedged between the top of a Welsh dresser and the wall.

Alice closed the door and peered into the nearby kitchen. Through the small window at the end of the room, a partly stone-flagged backyard was visible, a patch of bare earth beyond. An old lean-to housing the lavatory blocked what little winter light there was from entering the kitchen. There was no sign of running water; most working-class families were still filling buckets from a pump at the end of their street. The approaching twilight bathed the small area in shadows, the air fermenting with the smell of old dinners. With so many people living in the house the room was likely a place of much activity but, aside from a few black beetles scurrying across the floor and over the draining board, the overriding air was one of long abandonment.

The feeling of bleakness prevailed as the almoner made her way up the stairs. The rising wind caused a stray branch to tap rhythmically at the panes of the landing window, almost as if in warning.

It was a degree or two warmer upstairs than the kitchen had been but Alice shivered nonetheless as she ventured into the first bedroom. Bare, chipped floorboards bowed towards the middle of the room, the undulating surface and the sour tinge in the air adding to the general sense of unease.

Nothing stood out as being out of place. The bed, presumably belonging to Mr and Mrs Redbourne, stood low to the floor. Covered with a tatty, slightly stained tufted counterpane, it sagged drunkenly, as if in sympathy with the floor. Droopy

curtains hung half-closed at the windows and an old leather suitcase stood up on end in front of a dressing table of dark wood, perhaps as a makeshift stool.

Back in the hall, another staircase wound itself over the first, leading to the second floor. Notes in the file showed that Mrs Redbourne had been specifically questioned about the empty rooms upstairs by the Head Almoner, Bess Campbell, who suspected that they may have been sub-let. Mrs Redbourne claimed that the space was uninhabitable due to damp walls and unstable floorboards, but the almoners had visited families who had carved living spaces into stables and coal bunkers; a loft space, however unsafe, would have been appealing enough to command at least a few shillings in rent from a desperate family.

Foreign voices and a clattering of footsteps drifted down through the floorboards, followed by a loudly slammed door. The window in the hall rattled in protest. Alice turned and stared at the cracked ceiling before moving further along the hall to a much smaller room.

Here, the entire floor was hidden by a horsehair mattress and an assortment of fraying blankets and clothes. In the twenty-six years since the first almoner was appointed in 1895, much intelligence had been gathered about the sort of secrets that could lay buried within families. As seekers of truth, the almoners knew that sometimes the sinister could be masked by a cloak of ordinariness. It was one of the reasons they were told not to hurry their home inspections, but to take their time, so that the hidden might somehow reveal itself.

CHAPTER ONE

Alice stood quietly in the doorway, running her eyes around the room. It was only at the sound of purposeful strides on the stairs that she finally turned around.

The face of Mrs Redbourne's eldest daughter rose over the top of the banisters. The rustle of linen as the hem of Charlotte's skirt brushed the stair beneath her feet seemed to whisper something other than her arrival. In the light of the upstairs hall, the shadows under the girl's eyes became apparent, her cheeks speckled with a deep scarlet flush.

The almoner didn't say anything; probably hoping not to attract attention from other family members. Instead, she took a step closer to the young woman and gave a reassuring smile. In that fleeting moment, the teenager's desperation became evident.

After a wild glance behind her, Charlotte bit her bottom lip and then opened her mouth to speak. When no words came, Alice frowned and whispered: 'Charlotte, are you alright?'

'F-fine,' the teenager stammered, the word at odds with her countenance. 'But I-I think you should know -' She stopped, then burst into tears. Alice's fingers curled towards her palms, as if trying to encourage her to speak. 'W-what I mean is, I should have said something sooner, but it's too late now and ...', she faltered, her choked whispers stilted by the click of a door latch above.

Alice looked up. A middle-aged bespectacled gentleman wearing a long overcoat descended the stairs, a scarf knotted under his bearded chin. Charlotte whirled around and then scurried away, her long skirt fanning out behind her.

LETTERS FROM ALICE

‘Good day, Madam,’ the man said in a heavy accented voice. Alice nodded and waited in the hall as the man traced Charlotte’s footsteps downstairs. The almoner’s expression was serious. As soon as she had crossed the threshold of the Redbourne’s home, something had struck a false note.

By the time she left, she later recorded in her case notes, it appeared as if something truly disturbing were about to unfold.