

BOOK TWO

The Borribles Go for Broke

I

It was the hottest Sunday in the hottest July for a hundred years and Chalotte Borrible crouched in the cool shade beneath a green-grocer's barrow in Petticoat Lane market and munched a stolen apple. It was just about noon and all over London the pub doors were opening, even though the streets were as yet silent and empty. Nearly all the inhabitants of the great metropolis were hiding away from the heat, lying undressed on their beds, turning their eyes into the dark because it was too hot to get up and they were too idle to know what to do.

But in Petticoat Lane it was different. That was the busiest place in the world. Chalotte peered between the wooden wheels of the barrow and watched the feet trudging by, feet which belonged to thousands of Londoners, come from all over the capital on a Sunday morning jaunt, up early so they could push and jostle against each other in sweat and swelter as they struggled to examine the goods on every stall. They shouted and shoved and wrestled and the costermongers shouted too, opening their loose mouths to show stained and broken teeth.

Chalotte loved Petticoat Lane, it was such a marvellous place for a Borrible to live; a place where you could steal enough food on market day to last the rest of the week. She pushed her hand up and, unseen, took another apple. The fruit was warm to her touch as her fingers closed about it; the sweet flesh was warm in her mouth as she began to chew.

She ate the apple, right down to the core and the pips, then she ducked out into the open and stood poised, ready to run, but no one had noticed her. On the opposite pavement a group of men stood outside a green-tiled pub holding large glasses of bitter in their hands.

Their eyes glinted with pleasure as they upended the amber jugs and poured the liquid into their throats. When the ale reached their stomachs they made loud sighs of happiness and looked at each other with surprise, as if beer had only been invented that very morning.

Not far from the apple barrow a man was selling stolen watches out of a suitcase, in a doorway. Just beyond him Chalotte saw a pickpocket take a wallet from a lady's shoulder bag. Above the noise of people talking and walking came the sound of a man breaking crockery, whole dinner sets. It was his way of making the passers-by notice him. Chalotte smiled to herself, stole one last apple and moved on.

As she took her first step a rough hand wound itself into her long fair hair and seized her. A voice shouted into her ear. 'You thieving little bleeder,' it said, 'got you, haven't I?'

Chalotte twisted her head and looked up at the adult who had caught her. What she saw made her heart jump. She'd been captured by a plain-clothes policeman, of that she was certain. She didn't need a uniform to tell her who was a copper and who wasn't. She fought against the hand, cursing herself for carelessness, but its grasp did not slacken. One short moment of inattention and now her whole existence was in danger.

'Ow, leggo, you're hurting me,' she said, allowing the tears to come to her eyes in the hope that this would encourage the officer of the law to let her go. All round the barrow the busy street became blocked as the curious stopped to gloat and goggle; they looked down at the slender girl with her second-hand clothes and her dirty face, and they grinned.

'Go on, kid, run,' said a man, but the others in the crowd only grinned again and waited to see what the policeman would do. But he did nothing and shouts were heard in the side streets, coming from people who could not see what was happening and who were growing impatient at being hindered in their progress.

'Get a move on, can't yer?' said some and the shoving became fiercer.

The policeman took Chalotte to the end of the barrow. 'What's your name?' he asked, and Chalotte, like a true Borrible, had her answer ready.

'Chalotte Jenkins,' she said, 'and my mum's waiting down the end of

the street and she'll worry if I'm late . . . I'm sorry about the apple, honest, she'll pay for it. I'm sorry, mister, I was thirsty.' This she said to the costermonger, who wasn't particularly concerned about the theft of an apple anyway.

'Oh, let her go,' he said. 'She can have another one if she likes.'

'Yeah,' said somebody else, 'an apple a day keeps the coppers at bay.'

The policeman hesitated and Chalotte felt his hand relax in her hair; he was going to release her. She sniffed and tried to look as miserable as possible, but then, on a sudden thought, the policeman tightened his grip. He raised his free hand and, with a confident movement, swept back Chalotte's hair so that he and the crowd could see her ears. There was a gasp of surprise from the bystanders; Chalotte's ears were long and pointed – they were ears that showed great intelligence and daring – *Borrible* ears.

The policeman hooted with delight. 'Look at that,' he shouted. 'I've caught one, a Borrible, a real live Borrible,' and from the back pocket of Chalotte's trousers he pulled a catapult. 'And look at that,' he added, his face red and beaming with satisfaction, 'the Borrible weapon.'

'A Borrible,' said those in the front of the crowd, and they passed the word to the people behind them. 'A Borrible.'

'I ain't letting this one go,' shouted the policeman. 'I ain't letting her go! Quick, clear the road, you're causing an obstruction, move along there,' and he thrust the gawping spectators from his path, shouldered himself between two barrows and up on to the pavement.

Chalotte howled. She struggled and flailed her fists at the policeman, but he was too strong for her. He strode onward, clearing all before him, dragging his prisoner by his side.

'Back off, out of the way,' he bawled, 'police, police, stand back, out of my way!'

Chalotte continued to yell at the top of her voice but there was no one to help her. The policeman barged on through the shoppers and strollers, bursting open the groups of men who lounged outside the pubs, making them spill beer over their fingers and down their shirt fronts. And as policeman and prisoner went along the pavements and crossed the alleys of Petticoat Lane the hubbub quietened as they passed and men and women turned to look and laugh. Why shouldn't they?

Not one of them knew how serious the matter was; they did not realize that Chalotte was a Borrible and that for a Borrible to be caught is the very end.

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Borribles are thin as a rule and their ears are always pointed; apart from that they look like normal children although they may have been Borribles for years and years. They are tough-looking and scruffy but are renowned for their quickness of wit and their speedy running; a life lived on the streets sees to that.

Normal children become Borribles very slowly, without being aware of it. One day they wake up and there it is, the transformation has taken place. It doesn't matter in the slightest where they come from as long as they have had what other people call a bad start. A child disappears from school and the chances are that he's run away to become a Borrible. Sometimes it is said that a child has been put into care. It's more likely that he has been Borribled and is off caring for himself. One day a shout is heard in a supermarket and a child with stolen goods on him is arrested by a store detective. If that child manages to get away he'll join the Borribles and make sure that he isn't caught again, ever.

So Borribles are outcasts and runaways and they value their independence more than anything else because they take a deep delight in being what they are. They avoid adults; they don't like them and make no effort to. In fact the only people to get close to Borribles are ordinary children and that is because Borribles mix with them in order to escape detection by the authorities. Any child may have sat next to a Borrible or even talked to one, never noticing the ears on account of their long hair or the hats they wear, woollen ones, pulled well down.

Their greatest enemies are policemen – the Woollies. Woollies represent the authorities and the authorities cannot abide a Borrible. They don't like the free and easy way the Borribles choose to live. Running away from home, squatting in derelict houses and taking orders from no one is not neat, nor is it tidy.

For a policeman the capture of a Borrible is a rare and great achievement, it is also the end of freedom for the captive. That is why

Chalotte struggled with all her strength. Once that Woollie got her inside the police station it would be curtains.

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The policeman came to the end of Brick Lane and stopped on the edge of the Whitechapel Road, waiting for the traffic lights to change colour. He maintained his tight hold on Chalotte's hair and she continued to yell in pain. A small group of men, staggering gently from one pub to another, gathered on the corner and stared.

'Stop that bloody row,' said the Woollie, and he crouched so that he could push his big face into Chalotte's; she jerked her head backwards, the policeman's breath was damp and offensive, like mouldy bread. He laughed, spraying the girl with his saliva.

'Struggle all yer like, Borrible,' he said, 'it won't do you no good. I'll get promotion for this, I will.'

'What are you going to do with me?' asked Chalotte.

'Oh,' said the policeman, 'that's easy, got special orders for Borribles, we have. You see, about six months ago there was a rag-and-bone man killed over in Southfields, and his son, slaughtered in their own home, murdered with catapults, and we all know who uses catapults, don't we?' The policeman shoved Chalotte's weapon under her nose and tugged at her hair so fiercely that she wept, her tears making furrows down the dirt of her cheeks. The policeman smiled. 'Three of our men were injured, nearly killed one of them was, and ever since then Borribles have become top priority . . . Make no mistake, me girl, we'll be taking good care of you. You'll be going to see Inspector Sussworth, you will.'

The lights switched from red to green and the policeman stood upright and charged towards the traffic island in the middle of the wide road, pulling Chalotte along so quickly that her feet barely touched the tarmac.

'Who's Inspector Sussworth?' asked Chalotte, and she wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

The policeman stopped on the island and looked down at her. 'Sussworth,' he said, 'he's a wonderful man, and since those Southfields murders he's formed a group of specially trained officers, all dedicated

to the elimination of Borribles. They investigate Borribles, they study Borribles, they know more about Borribles than Borribles know about Borribles. You'll be sent to him, you will, and when he's asked you every question he can think of and made you answer them, why then he'll clip your ears and that'll be another Borrible less for us to worry about, won't it?'

The policeman laughed with profound enjoyment and spying a gap in the stream of cars he pulled Chalotte forward once more, hauling her to the far side of the road.

'You sod,' said Chalotte, 'you sod.' But the bravery of her words belied the fear she felt. She dreaded being sent to this Inspector Sussworth. If he clipped her ears she would revert to being an ordinary child; she would grow up. Left to themselves Borribles do not become adults and their small size is their pride and the source of their freedom. It means that they can always pass themselves off as children and yet they are often as experienced as the oldest person alive.

'Don't you swear at me,' said the policeman, 'you little savage. I've got strict orders; you're going to the SBG and that's it and all about it.'

'The SBG,' said Chalotte, 'what's that?'

'The SBG,' said the policeman, 'that's the Special Borrible Group, Sussworth's outfit, over Fulham way. That's where you'll be going, all in your own van. If you're lucky I'll come with you.' Laughing at his own joke he strode along all the faster with Chalotte trotting by his side, her mind spinning.

What the Woollie did not know was that this small female Borrible, accidentally captured, knew all about the Southfields murders and what she feared most of all was a severe interrogation. She might, under pressure, divulge valuable Borrible secrets; it would be disaster for her, disaster for her friends. She had seen Dewdrop Bunyan and his idiot son done to death, she knew those responsible, but even if she told her captors that the killings had been richly deserved it would make no difference. They would never believe her.

Chalotte and nine other Borribles had been kidnapped and held in slavery for months by this loathsome Borrible-snatcher. They had been beaten and starved and had only got away by luck. It had been her friends Knocker and Adolf the German who had killed Dewdrop and Erbie, slain them with catapults and well aimed marbles, so as to escape

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from torture and slow death themselves. Now Knocker and Adolf were dead too, killed during the Adventure of the Great Rumble Hunt, and so were Oroccoco, Torreycanyon and Napoleon; good Borribles gone for good, and soon she would be gone too. Was every Borrible who had been involved in the Great Rumble Hunt doomed to die? It certainly seemed so.

Despair welled up in Chalotte's heart and her mind misted over with it. She stumbled and the Woollie caught her with his rough hand.

'Come on, chummy,' he said, and then Chalotte heard herself shouting, as if from a great way off, shouting for help, knowing that only one of her own kind could save her now.

'A Borrible,' she screamed, 'a Borrible.' And away on the other side of Whitechapel another Borrible heard her; it was Twilight, the black-haired Bangladeshi from Folgate Street, up near Spitalfields.

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Twilight was thin and fragile but he could run like a train. His clothes were ragged and his hair was cut unevenly, long and thick and so black it looked blue. He had a sharp nose and one eyebrow that was cast higher than the other, making him look curious and sly at the same time. His eyes were big and dark and often full of thought, he was cheerful and determined; he was muggins for no one.

Twilight always roamed the streets with a band of Bangladeshi friends, about half a dozen of them, and they stuck together for protection. He only knew Chalotte by sight but he had heard some of the stories that were told about her and her part in the Adventure against the Rumbles. All that didn't matter now; the sight of a Borrible, any Borrible, being taken away by a Woollie was enough to inflame his blood. He called his friends to him and they ran as fast as they could along Whitechapel, on the opposite side to Chalotte, crossing the road eventually some three hundred yards ahead of her, positioning themselves in ambush between the officer of the law and his police station.

There was no time for elaborate schemes. Twilight knew that if he did not rescue Chalotte immediately she would disappear into the cells and never come out again, at least not as a Borrible. Round a corner, where Stanton Street meets the main road, he and his friends waited. When the policeman was only a step or two away Twilight gave the

word and he and his gang charged into Whitechapel at top speed with all the energy they could muster. They ran straight at the Woollie, shouting, jeering and yelling.

‘Watch out, Woollie; watch out, Woollie!’

Twilight rammed his hard head into the policeman’s soft stomach and there it almost disappeared, like a fist punched into a cushion. His mates followed on like a pack of street dogs run wild; tearing, pushing, and laughing too. Everybody went over, the Borribles letting themselves fall forward, using their speed and weight to topple the big policeman to the ground. They stuck to him, jabbed him, butted him and covered his eyes with their hands, and so this strange gyrating lump of noise rolled along the pavement forcing passers-by to leap into the roadway to escape injury. Hands, legs and heads appeared and disappeared as the lump turned once or twice, then whole bodies disengaged themselves. Chalotte felt herself grabbed under the armpits; there was a Bangladeshi Borrible on each side of her, another ran in front to clear the way. The policeman lay groaning on the ground, sorely winded, his mind utterly drained by the suddenness of the attack. It had only taken ten seconds and Chalotte was free.

Once more her feet hardly touched the ground but now she was borne along by friends and there was hope, not despair, in her heart. Nobody said a word, reserving every ounce of breath for flight. They were just a tight knot of brown Borribles carrying a white one to freedom.

The Woollie lurched to his feet and swung round, his arms stiff and straight, and then, with his boots banging the pavement slabs, he set off after the runaways. But he wasn’t in the race; by the time he reached the traffic lights the Borribles had disappeared. They had re-crossed the main road and lost themselves deep in the market, hiding like they always did where the crowd was thickest. The policeman knew full well that he had no chance of finding them now; they could be anywhere, under stalls, in their ruined houses, down side alleys, and they would be watching for him. The word would have gone abroad and every Borrible within a radius of ten miles would be taking cover.

The policeman stood and swore at his failure. He had imagined himself walking proudly into the police station with his captive. He had seen himself telephoning Inspector Sussworth and receiving congratula-

tions and thanks; he might even have been invited to join the SBG, a real plum of promotion for anyone in the Metropolitan Police Force. Ah well! It was not to be. He'd best say nothing about the incident; he didn't want to be laughed at. Sadly he turned and retraced his steps. Nothing to report.

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Back in the hustle of the market the Borribles slowed the pace of their escape, walking at first and then loitering to see if the Woollie was still in pursuit.

'We'd better split up for a while,' said Twilight to his gang. 'I'll take Chalotte back to Spitalfields while you others keep your eyes open for that copper; he may have gone back for help.'

Chalotte thanked the Bangladeshis and walked away from them, following Twilight. She found it hard to believe that she was safe and she smiled, taking pleasure in the business of the market and the feel of human bodies as they pushed past her. The sun, high in the sky, warmed the whole street, and the smells of strange spices drifted on the air. Sandalled Indian women went softly by, enveloped in saris that sparkled with gold. The costers still shouted at the passers-by, their voices vulgar and outrageous and cracking under the strain of many hours of bawling. Chalotte touched Twilight on the arm. The shirt he wore was gaudy, orange, sickly and luminous. His trousers were blue and too big for him, torn in several places; stolen trousers. His feet were bare but in the hot summer that was how he preferred to be. After all, the pavements were warm and cushioned in dust.

'Yes?' he said.

'Thanks for rescuing me,' said Chalotte. 'I was just looking at all this and wondering where I would be now if it hadn't been for you.'

Twilight tried to appear unconcerned. 'Well I heard you call out, didn't I? No Borrible can resist that. Besides, I was sent to look for you.'

'Look for me?' said Chalotte in surprise. 'I never saw you before. I don't even know your name, even if you've got one.'

'Course I have,' said the brown Borrible.

'What is it then?'

'Twilight,' said Twilight.