CHAPTER ONE

Bermondsey 1849

_The Modern Babylon, so great in other things,
has a giant’s appetite for mortality._
—_Household Words, June 1850_

Walk south across London Bridge, turn left, and you were in Tooley Street, the main east-west thoroughfare of Bermondsey. A predominantly working-class district with a population of thirty-five thousand in 1849, Bermondsey had for a century and a half been the center of London’s leather trade. The local street names still bear witness to Bermondsey’s age-old belief that “there’s nothing like leather”: Leathermarket Street runs into Tanner Street.

In 1833 the Leather Market was established at the intersection of Long Lane with New Weston Street, which in its northerly direction bent toward Tooley Street and the Thames. All phases of the trade were carried on in the vicinity. The skins of slaughtered animals were prepared by dealers called “fellmongers” and sold to the numerous tanneries that were in operation in Bermondsey and neighboring districts.

Under the best of circumstances Bermondsey was not one of the most salubrious areas of London for residents. In an 1850 survey of comparative death rates in London’s various regions conducted by the Registrar-General, Bermondsey’s mortality figures ranked well above the metropolitan average. _Household Words_, a journal edited by Charles Dickens, was not surprised with this result: “[Bermondsey was] just level with the water line, and poisoned by open drains and unsavoury factories.” A particularly infamous area of Bermondsey bearing the name “Jacob’s Island” lay to the east of St. Saviour’s Dock, a narrow inlet from the river. The Island was so called because it was
surrounded by polluted tidal ditches, and the *Morning Chronicle* dubbed the place “the Venice of the drains.” It was to Jacob’s Island that Bill Sikes, the murderer in *Oliver Twist*, fled after killing Nancy. In the novel Dickens sketched a memorable portrait of the slum:

Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it—as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage; all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch.

Life in Bermondsey was unusually precarious in 1849, when a cholera epidemic struck London and took its greatest toll among the poverty-ridden population of the low-lying regions of the south bank of the Thames. Londoners were stunned by the return of the plague, which had taken over one thousand lives in England in the last three months of 1848. The origins of the disease were not yet scientifically established, and all sorts of theories were proposed. The “zymotic” explanation related cholera to a noxious gas produced by the decomposition of water. In rebuttal, a newspaper correspondent proposed an “antizymotic” theory that the disease was caused by the absence of ozone in the atmosphere. *Punch* identified and attacked as breeding grounds of pestilence the open sewerage drains of the metropolis; the glue and soap factories and slaughterhouses situated in populous neighborhoods; and the overcrowded graveyards within city districts—the so-called intramural burial grounds.

The plague came on gradually in May and June, but by early September 10,142 had died, one out of every 192 of London’s population. Bermondsey stood second in the death rate, having lost 591, or one out of 59, and neighboring areas were also hard hit. Statistics, however, tell us less of the tragedy than we learn
from the commentaries of eyewitnesses. The novelist Charles Kingsley made a personal inspection of Jacob's Island, where the plague had done its worst. He was horrified by what he saw, "people having no water to drink, hundreds of them, but the water of the common sewer which stagnated, full of dead fish, cats and dogs under their windows." A writer for the Illustrated London News described the onslaught of the cholera on Newington, a parish hemmed in by Bermondsey and its devastated riverside neighbors, Lambeth and Southwark:

All day long was that sullen bell tolling—from morning to night it scarcely ceased a moment; for as soon as it had rung the knell of another departed spirit, there was a fresh funeral at the churchyard-gate, and again that "ding-dong" pealed mournfully through the sad and sultry atmosphere. Those who were left behind, too ill to join the funeral procession, heard not always the returning footsteps of the muffled mourners, for sometimes Death again entered the house while they were absent; and when they reached home they found another victim ready to be borne to the grave.

The cholera passed over the Bermondsey household at 3 Minver Place, in New Weston Street near the Leather Market, but death paid a visit in another guise. It came in the costume of friendship.