

SAPPHIRE BATTERSEA

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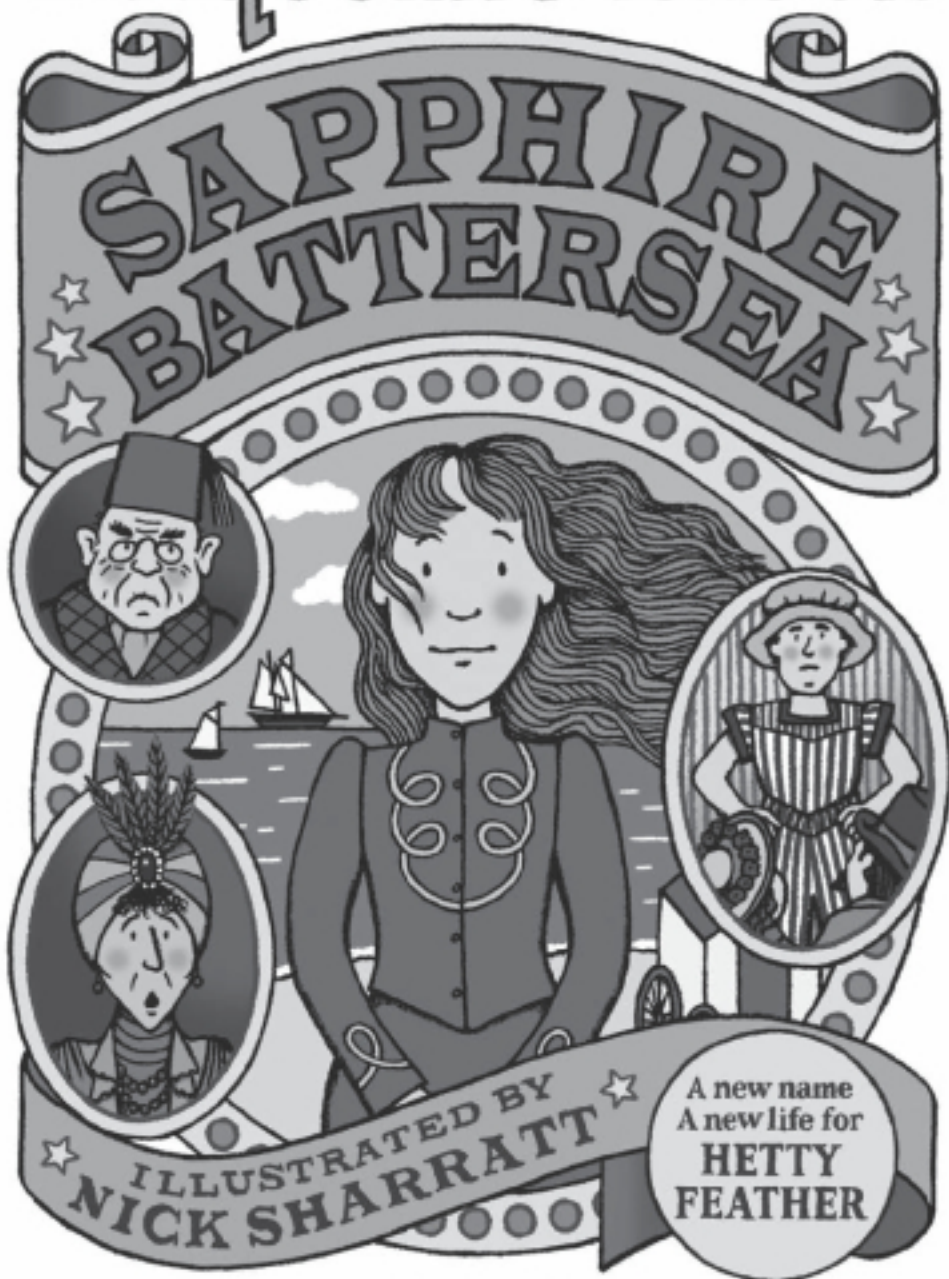
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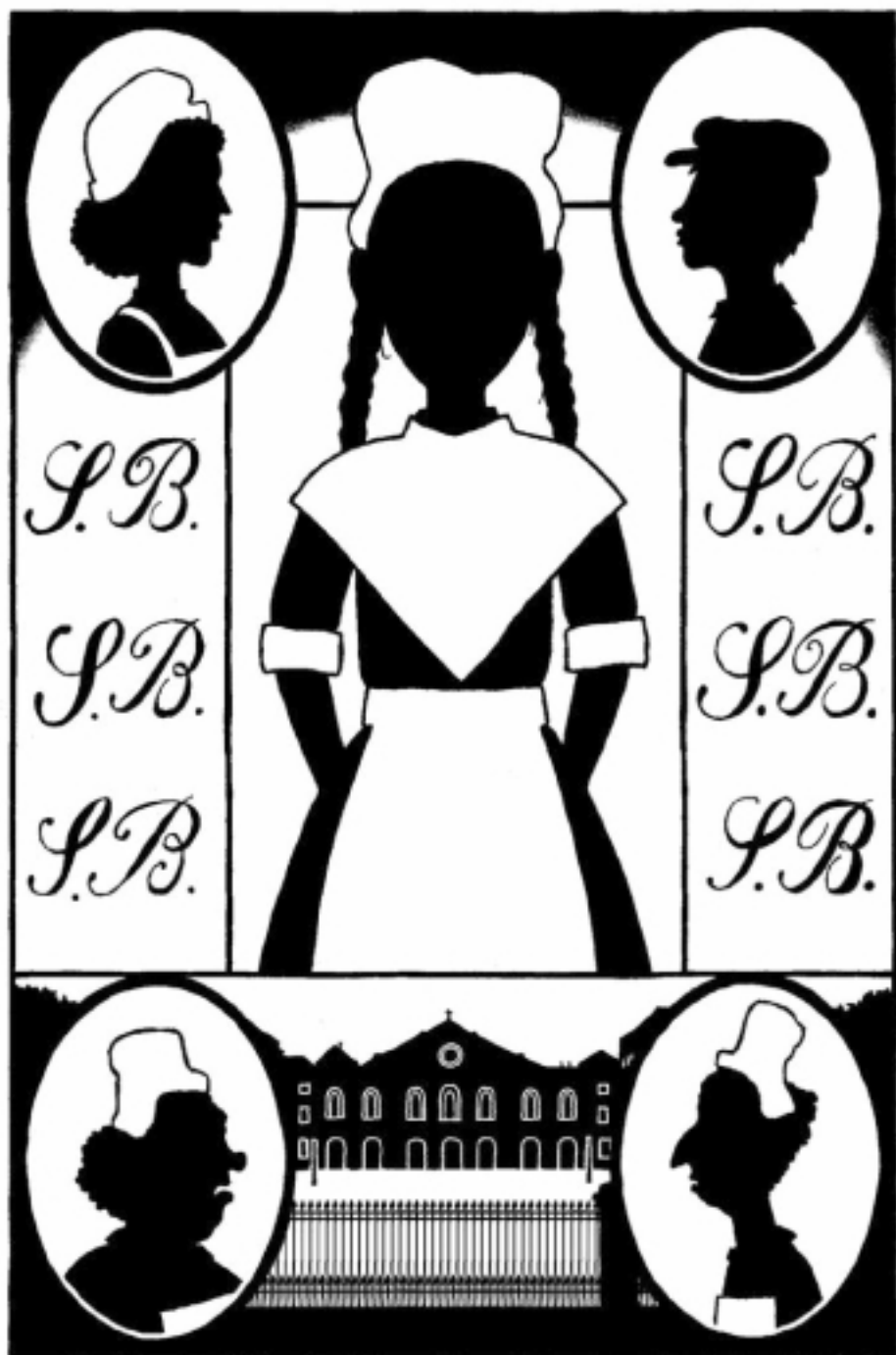
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For my two best girls



I

My name is Sapphire Battersea. Doesn't that sound beautiful? I write it over and over again on the covers of this private notebook. I stitch a secret S.B. inside the neck of my uniform. I stir a swirly S.B. into the soup when I am helping the cook. I scrub a soapy S.B. when I am cleaning the floor. I whisper my own name in bed at night in the freezing dormitory, and my breath rises and forms the letters in the dark.

I am Sapphire Battersea, but nobody calls me by my real name, not even my dear mother. Mama chose to call me Sapphire because my eyes were so blue when I was born. But even she calls me Hetty now.

'I'm *not* Hetty. It's such a stupid name. It's just a hateful foundling label. I *hate* the way they change all our names, making them up randomly. They don't sound like real names. Hetty Feather! It's ridiculous.'

'You could have had worse,' said Mama. 'Just

think, you could have been *Grizel Grump*.'

Poor Grizel is a girl in little Eliza's year at the Foundling Hospital. Everyone calls her Gristle, and consequently she is always a grump, like her name.

'Sapphire is so elegant, so romantic. It's a perfect name for a writer,' I said, signing it in the air with a flourish.

'Let us hope you become one, then,' said Mama, a little tartly.

'You wait and see. I will publish my memoirs and make our fortune. Miss Smith will help me. My story will be turned into a proper book with gold lettering and a fancy picture on the front, just like all her own Sarah Smith stories published by the Religious Tract.'

'I'm not sure *your* stories would be suitable for a religious press, Hetty,' said Mama, laughing.

'*Sapphire!* Why won't you call me by my true name – the one you chose for me?'

'I suppose Hetty has become a habit, dearie,' said Mama, tweaking my red plait.

'I always call you Mama when we're alone,' I said, a little hurt.

'Yes, but I wish you wouldn't. It's tempting fate. One slip in front of the others and we're done for,' said Mama, and she pulled me close.

'I will never slip, Mama,' I swore fervently. 'No one will ever find out that you are my real mother.'

I hadn't known myself for the first ten long years of my life. Poor Mama had been forced to give me to the Foundling Hospital when I was a little baby because she had no means of supporting me. I was soon fostered out to the country. I lived with a kind family. I loved my foster mother and father and all my foster siblings. I especially adored my foster brother Jem.

I had hero-worshipped him. I treasured the silver sixpence he'd given me when I was taken off to the Foundling Hospital at five. He promised he'd wait for me and marry me one day. I was so little and stupid I actually believed him – until young Eliza arrived at the hospital from the same foster home five years later. She prattled away about *her* dear Jem. I found out that he'd made exactly the same empty promises to her. I couldn't forgive him. I decided to put him out of my mind for ever.

I had found the rigid life of the hospital horribly hard. Some of the nurses were kind, but the two matrons were excessively cruel. I suffered from the attentions of Matron Pigface Peters when I was small, and of Matron Stinking Bottomly when I went into the Seniors. They each went out of their way to punish and humiliate me. I hated them both.

I found it difficult to make friends with the other girls too. I made downright enemies of Sheila and Monica. When Polly came to the hospital, we were

like soul mates, but she was adopted by rich folk and we never saw each other again.

My only true friend was Ida, the kitchen maid. I ran away from the hospital on Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee – and when I came back, Ida was so overwhelmed that she called me her own child when she hugged me. I could scarcely believe it! Ida was my true birth mother. She had skivvied and slaved at the Foundling Hospital for years just so that she could get a glimpse of me every day. She'd slip me an extra potato at dinner, or sprinkle secret sugar on my breakfast porridge. She'd always had a smile or a kind word, and helped me to blossom in that bleak institutional world.

When I became aware of the wondrous truth of our relationship, my whole life changed. I cannot say I became an exemplary foundling. Whether I am Sapphire or Hetty, I still have a temper that lives up to my flaming red hair. But whenever Matron Stinking Bottomly slapped me for impertinence and forced me to scrub the whole length of the hall, I knew Mama was nearby, watching and waiting, burning with sympathy. She'd catch my eye across the crowded dining room at mealtimes, and I'd feel calmed.

Sometimes, when everyone slept in the dormitories, I dared creep right out of the door, along the shadowy landing, down, down, down the great

stairs, through kitchens that still smelled of stewed mutton and rice pudding, along the winding corridor to Mama's own tiny bedroom. I'd push open the door and she'd leap up from her bed and hug me hard. We'd sit together and whisper well into the night. Sometimes we'd lie close together on Mama's narrow bed, clasping each other close. I'd trace her dear face in the dark and she'd wind my long plaits around her own neck. We'd feel utterly united, making up for all those many years we'd lived apart.

But then – oh, I can hardly bear to write it. It was all because of Sheila. She was always a light sleeper. She must have woken when I crept through the long dormitory. She didn't call out. She lay there, waiting, and then slid stealthily out of her bed, intent on following me, the sly cat. She was so furtive and silent on her bare feet that I didn't hear her padding behind me. I didn't notice the creak of the stairs as she followed me down to the ground floor.

She stole along behind me all the way to Mama's room. I wonder how long she waited outside, her ear to the door? She suddenly burst in upon us, as Mama and I cuddled close in a fond embrace, clearly visible in the flickering candlelight.

'Whatever are you *doing*, Hetty Feather!' she exclaimed. 'Why are you lying there with *Ida*?'

‘Go away! Get out! Get out of Mama’s room!’ I cried in furious passion.

‘*Mama’s room?*’ said Sheila.

‘It is just Hetty’s little game,’ Mama said quickly, giving me a shake.

But Sheila was no fool. ‘You are Hetty’s *mother?*’ she said.

‘No! Like Ida said, it’s just my silly game,’ I declared, springing off the bed.

Sheila was still staring, open-mouthed. ‘Yes, now I see it!’ She darted between us, staring rudely. ‘You two *are* alike. You’re both so small and slight – and you both have blue eyes. Oh my goodness, how extraordinary! Have you known all this time, Hetty? I’d never have thought you could keep such a secret so long,’ she said.

It was no use denying it further.

‘It’s the most private, precious secret! If you dare breathe a word of this to anyone, I’ll tear out your tattle-tale tongue and feed it to the pigs,’ I said.

‘Temper temper!’ said Sheila, eyes gleaming. ‘So, what will you do for me to keep me sweet and silent?’

‘This isn’t a schoolgirl game, Sheila,’ said Mama, getting out of bed and gripping her by the shoulders. ‘I haven’t lived this life year after year to have it carelessly destroyed by a spiteful girl. You

mustn't tell a soul. If those matrons find out, then we're done for. Swear that you'll keep silent!

'I won't say a word to anyone, I promise,' said Sheila, but her eyes were still bright. I feared she'd tell Monica the moment she was back in the dormitory.

I'll never know how much she'd have told and whether she'd have deliberately betrayed Mama and me. We were discovered anyway. Mama and I were used to whispering, but Sheila had a high clear voice that travelled far. By terrible chance Matron Pigface Peters had shuffled down to the kitchen, seeking out a midnight snack from the pantry. She heard Sheila repeating, 'Just fancy Ida being your real mother, Hetty!'

Matron Pigface barged her way into Mama's crowded bedroom, a hideous sight in her nightcap and ruffled gown, her greasy hair coiling in true pig's tails about her cheeks. She stared at Mama, at Sheila, at me.

'Repeat what you said just now, Sheila Mayhew!' she commanded.

'I - I don't remember what I said,' Sheila stammered.

'The girls were playing a silly game, Matron. I was about to scold them and send them back to their dormitory,' said Mama.

'Don't lie to me, Ida Battersea!' She was

squinting at her now, then peering at me. ‘Can this really be *true*? Are you Hetty Feather’s mother?’

‘How could I be?’ said Ida. ‘It’s a game, I told you, an idle fancy, because the girls all long for their mothers.’

Matron Pigface Peters dragged me over to the candle, clutching my chin, turning my face this way and that. Then she went to grab hold of Mama.

‘Don’t you dare touch me! And take your hands off that child too – look, you’re hurting her!’

‘It’s the truth that hurts, Ida Battersea! I see the likeness now! How could you have been so devious? You’ve been deceiving us for years and years! You were supposed to give up your ill-gotten child for ever – not work here with her glorying in your disgraceful situation. Have you two been secretly communing all this time? It beggars belief! How *dare* you both deceive us like this!’

‘It wasn’t Hetty’s fault, Matron. She didn’t know – not for ever so long. I meant no harm. I just wanted a glimpse of her every day – that was enough,’ said Mama, starting to sob. ‘When she disappeared on the day of the Jubilee, I could hardly contain myself. I worried fit to burst. When she came back at last, I was so relieved I fainted dead away.’

‘Oh yes, I remember that!’ said Sheila. ‘We all

thought you'd died on the spot! So did you tell Hetty then?"

'Hold your tongue, Sheila Mayhew! This is nothing to do with you. Go back to the dormitory this instant. You are to keep utterly silent on this shameful matter,' said Matron Pigface.

'It's not shameful to love your own child!' I said furiously. 'Mama's done nothing wrong.'

'We'll see if the Board of Governors agrees with you! It's my opinion they'll take a very grave view of this deception. I would prepare yourself for instant dismissal, Ida Battersea – with no character reference, so don't expect to get another job in any decent God-fearing establishment. You're morally corrupt and an evil influence on all our girls.'

'How dare you threaten Mama like that!' I cried. 'You wait, Matron Peters! My friend and benefactress Miss Sarah Smith is on the Board of Governors. She will never send my own mama away. *You* will be the one who's sent away, because you're cruel and wicked, and you have no heart at all inside your big fat chest!'

She dragged me away, shouting and screaming. I did not even have time to kiss Mama and say good-bye. I struggled hard, but Matron Pigface slapped me about the head and picked me up bodily. Half the girls from the dormitory were clustered on the stairs, gawping at me.

‘Go back to your beds this instant!’ Matron Pigface shrieked, and they scuttled away.

She carried on dragging me up another flight of stairs.

‘No! No, please don’t put me in the punishment room!’ I screamed. ‘I can’t stand it there, you know I can’t!’

‘You deserve to stay locked up in there for ever!’ said Matron Pigface, thrusting me into the terrifying dark cupboard.

‘No, please, I beg you! Don’t lock me in! Please, I haven’t done anything *wrong!*’

‘You’re the most evil child I’ve ever come across. You have no shame, show no respect! You act as if you’re as good as anyone else. Just remember you’re a common foundling, born in sin, without a father. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were the spawn of the Devil himself,’ she panted, and she locked the door on me.

It was the longest, most agonizing night of my life. I hit the door and walls until my knuckles were bloody – and then I cast myself down on the floor and wept. I called again and again for Mama, but she didn’t come. I was frightened they’d locked her up too.

When one of the nurses let me out in the morning, I pushed right past her and ran all the way downstairs to Mama’s room . . . but she wasn’t

there! Her cap and apron and print dresses were gone from the pegs on her wall, her brush and comb and her cake of soap and her flannel were gone from her chest. The very pillowcase and sheets had been stripped from her bed, leaving a bare black-and-white striped mattress. There was no trace left of Mama. It was as if she had never existed.