

The Whicharts

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CHAPTER 1

The Whichart children lived in the Cromwell Road. At that end of it which is furthest away from the Brompton Road, and yet sufficiently near it to be taken to look at the dolls' houses in the Victoria and Albert every wet day, and if not too wet expected to "save the penny and walk."

Saving the penny and walking was a great feature of their childhood.

"Our Father," Maimie the eldest would say, "must have been a definitely taxi person; he couldn't have known about walking, or he'd never have bought a house at the far end of the longest road in London."

"Our Father," Tania the second child would argue, "was a Rolls-Royce man, his own you know, I don't believe he ever hired anything."

Their Father was a legendary hero to the children. They knew so little about him, and that little sounded so exciting. "Our Father would have done this, or said that", they would romance. No story was too improbable for such a man.

He had been a soldier, with many honours, and even more mistresses. His first mistress, or at least the one credited with being his first, was a Miss Rose Howard. She belonged to a most rigidly respectable family, and was at that time twenty-two.

She met the Brigadier, as she always called him, at a military ball. He was a Captain in those days, and

newly married to a lady of such remarkable social eminence and blue blood, that he was guaranteed a brilliant future. He saw Rose, and fell in love. With the Brigadier to be in love was to make love. This he did entrancingly. So entrancingly that he persuaded Rose to leave her family, her home, her respectability, to live in the Cromwell Road under his guardianship.

Followed months of quarrels and frictions with her family. Outraged fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, strode wrathfully down the Cromwell Road, and savagely rang her bell. Ten minutes later, these same outraged fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, strode even more wrathfully up the Cromwell Road. Either having rung her bell in vain, or seen such a glowing and happy Rose, that their showers of angry words were not only unable to hurt her, but seemed scarcely to reach her understanding. Finally they held a meeting. No women were present, Rose and her affairs were not fit for a woman's ears. She had long been nothing but a scandalised whisper in the family, now she was to cease to be even a whisper. She had chosen a life of shame, then let her live it. Her family never wished to see or hear of her again.

Joyously Rose told this news to her Brigadier. "How perfect," she breathed in his ear, "we're all alone in the world now, fancy never seeing or hearing any of them again."

"Fancy, darling," echoed the Brigadier. But he looked pensive.

Grace, the Brigadier's wife, bore his lapse from fidelity with well-bred indifference. Generations

during which her family had found fewer and fewer people, "Really fit to know, my dear!" had reduced their marriageable circle to smaller and smaller dimensions, until at last they had been forced to marry each other. The Brigadier was one of the few members of the family, brought in from outside, as it were, perhaps in the hope of improving the stock. For this rather internal system of marriage had produced in Grace a something which in a more plebeian circle would have been described as "a brick loose," but in her own family was described as, "Grace is so reposeful, dear thing, nothing seems to move her." Certain it is that she was utterly unconcerned by this the first, or any subsequent affair that "Deah George," as she called him, walked or fell into. So Rose was free to enjoy her Brigadier in the Cromwell Road to her heart's content.

Perhaps the fact that Rose was all alone in the world except for himself. Perhaps her love, such a very undemanding love, touched him. But he stuck to Rose longer than to any of the other women in his life. He was with her for eight years. Of course during those eight years there may have been moments, backslidings, but the fact remains that for eight years he was an almost daily visitor in the Cromwell Road.

One day he told her that he wasn't coming back. He had always said if she should tire of him or he of her, they must at once tell each other the truth. To Rose the contingency had been too awful to contemplate, and her side of the bargain simply a joke.

“Tire of him!” Heavens above! how could anyone tire of such a man.

It was a wet afternoon in November. The streets looked like grey ice. On the tops of the buses unlucky people who couldn't squeeze inside huddled under the mackintosh covers. Wet dogs half walked and half were blown down the road. The lamps were just being lit, and their little yellow glow picked out the slanting grey lead pencils of rain. A truly deplorable November day. Rose had been staring rather gloomily out of the window. She thought the Brigadier had been strange lately, hadn't made love to her. True, that was no novelty, he'd always been like that, crazy about her one minute, crushing her, unable to leave her alone, then suddenly full of casual talk of people and things, scarcely a kiss when he arrived, and when he left. But this was different, now he was—what was he? She wouldn't confess it even to herself, but wasn't there a something? The door opened, and he hurried in.

Courage was a thing the Brigadier never lacked. He told her at once. There was someone else. Maimie. Daughter of a Scotch minister. It was all terribly difficult. Her family would kill him if they knew, but there it was, they adored one another.

“Oh Rose, she's so lovely. She's a selfish little devil. She'll never be to me one half what you have been. But I can't resist her. Can't see life without her”.

After a time he left her. He explained a lot first. It seemed she was to have enough to live on. The house was hers. Oh, a lot more. Somehow she

couldn't hear clearly. He said he'd write. Then the front door slammed.

Ever afterwards when she saw from that window the pavements wet with rain she would find herself straining to hear the front door slam.

She never knew what she did that winter. She supposed she ate and drank and lived as usual, for when the spring came she was still alive, at least her body moved. Then suddenly in April she was ill. Nothing much, influenza, but it seemed as though she would never get better, no will to live, nothing to get up for, a perfectly blank grey future.

People won't let you die. The doctor and nurses collected by the frightened cook and housemaid, dragged her unwilling spirit back to earth. Carted her protesting body to Brighton. And in the early autumn returned her more or less intact to the Cromwell Road.

During all these months Rose had no word from the Brigadier. True, she always had news of him from the papers. He was always in the papers. News of someone you love that you learn through the papers is worse than no news at all. Rose soon learnt that.

In October he turned up again.

The bell rang. His footsteps sounded on the stairs exactly as though ten and a half tortured months had not gone by since she had heard them last. In he walked. Told Rose she looked a bit peaky. Hoped she wasn't doing too much.

"You women never know when to stop, burn the candle both ends, out all day and all night."

Rose, living for the first time after ten and a half

dead months, vaguely agreed.

“I say, old lady,” he blundered on, “I wonder if you’d do me a great favour?”

Maimie, it seemed, was going to have a baby.

“You’ve no idea,” he explained, “just how awful it is. Her people are Scots, and narrow-minded. My God! Rose, you’ve no idea how narrow-minded, would call what we’ve been doing fornication! Maimie’s got caught —daren’t go home, poor little devil, and well——”

Out it came. Would Rose take her in?—just till the baby was born—they’d find someone nice to adopt it—Maimie could make excuses to her family—they wouldn’t like it of course,—but they’d never come south—they’d never find out.

“If Maimie’s here, he will come here,” thought Rose. But all she said was, “Bring Maimie to me.”

That was a funny winter. Rose often looked back and smiled at the memory of it. Maimie and she had so little in common, and yet she’d grown fond of the girl, who could help it? Maimie was a magnificent creature, tall, fair, with big blue eyes, and the most winning personality. People couldn’t help adoring her. Everyone in Rose’s household adored her. The housemaid who thought she was steering straight for Hell’s fires. Nannie who came a month before the baby was born, learnt the truth, and said she’d leave that night, and stayed for the rest of her life. The doctor who on a cold December morning brought the little Maimie into the world. “Look,” he said, “here’s a lovely daughter for you,” and was deeply hurt to hear the mother say, “Oh, take the little

horror away! Thank God somebody's going to adopt it." But he still worshipped Maimie.

Rose watched Maimie in the days that followed for a sign that she cared even a little for her baby. There was none. The girl was unfeignedly thankful that a ghastly worry was nearly over. She wanted nothing but to know that the baby was safely adopted, and herself in the train on the way to Scotland and respectability.

"But your baby. Can't you see, Maimie, some day you'll want her, you'll wonder where she is, you'll miss her, my dear, it isn't natural what you're doing. Women were meant to be mothers."

"If you feel like that keep her yourself. A reputation's a wretched thing to lose. Before the year is out I shall be married—well married—then I mean to have a wonderful time, but until then, no—once bitten, my dear! What kind of a life would I have with that tied on to me," she would point a disgusted finger at the baby, "you must be mad to suggest it!"

One day the Brigadier came to them in triumph. He'd found a splendid couple to adopt little Maimie.

"Cheer up, old lady, it will all be over soon; we shall be out of the wood, we shall never hear of the poor little devil again."

Rose was not a maternal woman, but little Maimie's fate touched her. There must be something of the Brigadier in the baby. It didn't show, but it must be there.

"Don't have her adopted," she said, "I'll keep her."

Before Maimie left Rose produced a Bible.

“Laugh if you like, but your baby has got to have something to remember you by. I want you to give her this Bible. Sign your name and address here.”

Maimie glared at the blank fly-leaf, then she turned to Rose.

“You must be mad! Here am I moving heaven and earth to hide what I’ve done, and you ask me to give myself away. Leave the child my name and address? I should never feel safe for a moment. Why, she could use it against me at any time.”

Rose looked at her.

“Can’t you trust me? I swear as long as I live she shall never have this book, and when I am dead she shall only have it if she’s grown up the sort of person one”—she hesitated—“one can trust to use it discreetly,” she finished lamely.

Months of being hopelessly miserable had brought Rose strength of character. She hadn’t exactly hardened, but she had grown to a woman. Two years before she could not have persuaded Maimie into saying good-morning, against her will. Now she made her sign the Bible.

“To little Maimie,” she wrote in her dashing hand. She wrote her name in full, and added the address.

“Thank you.” Rose locked away the book. “You can trust me.”

Little Maimie settled down in the Cromwell Road. She had a nursery at the top of the house. Rose was sweet to her. Nannie worshipped her. Cook petted her, and was sorry for her. To the housemaid she was a figure of romance.

Then one spring day when she was nearly one-and-a-half the Brigadier turned up again.

He did not come alone. He brought Tania.

She was the daughter of an extremely wealthy newspaper magnate. He had married a Russian of slightly royal blood. The result was Tania.

She was crushed but still proud.

Yes, she'd been an inconceivable idiot. "Imagine it—going to have a baby—I've had plenty of men before—how could I have been so careless—God knows!—however, there it is—yes, next month positively boresome!"

Rose took the Brigadier into another room.

"This is getting past a joke; I'm not the Queen Charlotte. I'll take in Tania, I like her, but she is the last. You can have all the Bettys, and Doris's, and Flossies you like, but no one else shall have a baby here."

The Brigadier was hurt.

"You're getting the teeniest bit hard. You used to be such a soft little thing. Don't let things make you hard, old lady. Such a pity. Nothing in life is worth it."

Rose looked at him. She couldn't think of anything to say.

She loved Tania. She was charming. All moods. Up in the clouds one minute, down in the depths the next. She had blue eyes, the Russian high cheekbones, and shining black hair. She had inherited her father's quick business brain. From her mother a love of the arts. Music, pictures, a piece of good acting, all brought a quick sighing gasp of pleasure.

But she was incapable of expressing herself. All she would say was, "Deevy!" or "Too quaint."

She was a trouble to look after. Had never done a thing for herself in her life. In some way ordinary things, such as turning on her bath, or mending her own clothes, hurt her. She said nothing, never complained or asked for help. But a curious flush would rise under her skin, and her whole body express resentment at a world which could expect such commonplaces of her.

She was a never-ending source of amusement to Rose. Neither of the servants nor Nannie cared for her as they had for Maimie. But they respected her, and treated her as though she were married.

She was very ill when her baby was born. Her bones were so small. She endured agony for hours. She never moaned. Rose looked in once, and was horrified at the girl's white tortured face. Tania smiled at her. "Positively too painsome," she whispered.

Tania's baby was also a girl. Little Tania. There was no talk this time of adoption. There was Nannie, there was the nursery. Rose, too, was by that time so fond of the girl she was glad to keep her baby.

The night before Tania left Rose produced a Bible.

"She shan't ever have it during my life," she explained. "But I like to think that perhaps some day, years and years ahead, she could find you if she really needed you. I made Maimie sign one too."

There was a pause. Then Tania's head dropped on the book. Her sobs grated through the room.

"I can't, Rose, I can't; I've tried, but I can't give

my baby up.”

She was over-persuaded by the Brigadier.

“You can’t ruin your life, old lady, what chance have you with a baby? None. Leave her to Rose.”

The next day she went away. The last glimpse Rose ever had of her was a drooping figure in the corner of a taxi. A white face tried to smile at her, it was a gallant effort, but undeceiving. All happiness seemed to have left her.

Nannie, who was a philosopher, accepted the second baby cheerfully.

“Very nice for Maimie to ’ave a companion.”

After the blue eyes and golden curls of Maimie, she considered the new arrival’s dark eyes and sallow skin a tragedy.

“It’s easy to see who’s goin’ to be Miss Plain in this nursery,” she said.