

CHAPTER ONE

It was terribly cold in our house in Old Manor Road. On the days when there was ice on the insides of the windows, my father would carry buckets of coal up from the cellar and light a fire in the room I shared with my middle sister, Hope. But on that last winter in our old home I was too weak to notice most of the time.

I'd fallen ill just after Christmas. At first, they thought I had flu, but when they realized I actually had polio, there was a dreadful panic. The doctor sent for an ambulance, and I was packed off to the isolation hospital for infectious diseases where all the nurses were hidden behind masks and gloves and overalls. I couldn't even see their faces.

When I first went into hospital, I hardly knew where I was. I felt sick and hot and achy all over. But the worst thing was that I couldn't move. My neck was as stiff as a plank and, although I kept trying to lift my arms or shift my legs, they wouldn't obey me. I knew they were still there, though, because they hurt all the time.

The Sister of the Children's Polio Ward was horribly

unsympathetic. She kept telling me that I was lucky not to have died, and that I'd be even luckier if I ever managed to walk again. She'd scrape a brush with iron teeth through my mouse-brown hair every morning and tie my plaits so tightly that my scalp would ache for the rest of the day.

The other nurses were kind, I think, but they were afraid to come near me. I heard one whisper to another, 'They ought to transfer you to another ward. You've got children at home, haven't you? What if they catch it?'

I was dreadfully lonely. Visiting hours were half an hour once a week, and only one person was allowed at a time. Visitors weren't even allowed to come near me, but could only wave through a window. When my father came, he wrote messages and held them up to the glass, but I couldn't turn my head to read them properly. It was almost worse than if he hadn't come at all.

I can still remember the pattern of cracks on the ceiling above my hospital bed. I had nothing else to look at, after all. I kept trying not to think about what it would be like if I was paralysed for life, and I would have long conversations with Jesus, explaining to Him how good I would be if He would only make me better.

Sometimes, though, I was too angry to talk to Him at all.

'It's so unfair!' I wanted to shout. 'Why does polio only paralyse children and not grown-ups? And why can't You just stop it happening at all, to anyone?'

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I don't want to go on thinking about those dreadful days. They did come to an end at last because slowly I started being able to move again. The horrible Sister had to stop telling me I'd never walk again, but ticked me off instead for not doing my exercises enough.

Then, after the worst ten weeks of my entire life, my father, who can't bear to see anyone suffer, came on the weekly visit, took one look at me through the glass window and saw that I was crying. He marched off to the doctors and said he'd checked, and I wasn't infectious any more, and he was taking me home, thank you very much.

Things were quiet at home, because Hope, who was at boarding school in Scotland, wasn't yet back for the Easter holidays, and Faith, my oldest sister, who was training to be a nurse, had decided to move in to the nurses' home in case Dad was wrong and I was still infectious. Only my older brother, Ted, was there. His real name is Theodore, which means 'God's gift', and that's just as well because he thinks he *is* God's gift, to girls, anyway.

I was quite ill, actually, even after Dad brought me home. Sometimes I'd wake up in the night in a panic, thinking I was still completely paralysed. Dad would hear me groaning and he'd pad into my room in his old bedroom slippers. He'd get me some water and make me sip it slowly, then he'd kneel beside my bed and pray, 'Lord Jesus, comfort this child of Thine and heal her for Thy Name's sake.' Then he'd croon the hymn he used to sing to me when I was really little. I sort of liked it, but it was embarrassing too because I was twelve and a half, after all.

It was very boring being at home and having to rest in bed most of the time. Sometimes I wondered what everyone was doing, but not as often as you'd think. After a couple of months in hospital, school had rather faded from my life, which was actually a relief because I'd never enjoyed it much anyway. In fact, not having to go to school was the best thing about still being ill. It's not easy being a Faithful Follower of Christ in a worldly place like a school. None of the other girls worried all the time about whether or not they were being true to Jesus. They just thought I was peculiar. I don't want to sound sorry for myself, but the truth is that I was the girl no one wanted to sit next to, the girl no one picked for teams.

It hadn't been too bad while Faith and Hope were still at home. Sisters can be sort of friends, after all. But I'd been lonely once they'd gone.

You'd think I'd spend my time worrying about whether I'd ever get really better, but I strongly believed that I would. Most of my body worked all right, though my left arm and leg were still weak, and anyway the whole family had prayed so much for me to be better that I reckoned God would just have to listen soon.

The thing I hated most about being stuck in bed was waking up in the morning and hearing Mother and Dad in the kitchen downstairs and thinking they'd forgotten about me. I could practically see them sitting at the kitchen table, passing the toast and marmalade, and Ted rushing in at the last minute, still tying his tie.

A bit later I'd hear the front door close. That would be Dad

going off to the station, where he'd be catching the 8.15 train to London. He runs a missionary society, which is good, of course, because he's spreading the Word of the Lord, but it isn't very convenient because they don't pay him.

'The Lord will provide,' I once heard him say to Mother, when she brought up the possibility of us having a fridge. 'We're living by faith, dear. You know that.'

She had to agree with him out loud, of course, because the Bible says that wives should obey their husbands, but later I heard her say to her friend Olive Prendergast, as they buttered sandwiches for the Fellowship Tea, that living by faith was all very well, but actually it meant living off donations from other people who might not have enough for themselves.

Then the front door would go again. Slammed this time. That would be Ted. He'd rev up his bike to annoy the neighbours, then I'd hear it roar all the way down the street till it turned the corner on to the main road.

You can't blame girls for liking Ted. I would if I wasn't his sister because he's really handsome and he's got a motorbike. When he left school, he had to do his two years' National Service in the armed forces. He chose the Navy so he could go off and sail the seven seas. If I'd been a boy, and I'd had to do National Service, I'd have chosen the Air Force. Think about it! What's more exciting than flying? I *bet* Ted only chose the Navy because the uniform made him look so handsome. It was dark blue with a cheeky white cap and the name of his ship embroidered on the front in gold letters. Girls swooned over him when they saw him all dressed up, but none of them knew

the secret wickedness of his heart.

Just to give you an example – one day he brought his friend Adam home for tea. Adam is something, I can tell you. Sort of lean and muscular, with one of those faces where the skin is a bit loose so every twitch of the mouth or eyebrows is expressive. Anyway, there I was, going up the stairs, when they came in through the front door, and Ted said, ‘That’s my little sister, Charity.’

‘Not so little,’ Adam said, looking straight at me.

And Ted said, ‘*Are* you still little, Char? Have you got hair growing in your armpits yet?’

I nearly *died*, standing right there on the stairs, then I fled to my bedroom. I shouldn’t wonder if it was the stress of living with Ted that made me catch polio. Why me, after all, and not one of the other girls in my class at school?

Anyway, you see what I mean about Ted? Only someone with a cruel heart would say a thing like that to an innocent young girl.

I missed Hope dreadfully when she was away at her boarding school in Scotland. The holidays always passed so quickly. I burned with a sense of injustice that I hadn’t been sent there too. If I had, I pointed out to Mother, on more than one occasion, I’d have been in the depths of the countryside, miles away from infection, and I’d never have caught polio in the first place. You can see why I felt jealous, when I tell you that Hope was living in a great big old mansion with lots of girls who had posh names like Anastasia and Griselda, and half of

them had their own ponies! She'd learned Scottish dancing and how to hold her teacup with her little finger crooked up.

The reason she was there was because Dad's older sister, Aunt Josephine, was the headmistress, and she paid for Hope's fees and her uniform and everything. She didn't offer to pay for Faith or me. She said she'd picked Hope because Hope's health was delicate and she needed lots of country air. In my opinion, it was pure favouritism. Aren't I delicate too? Who had polio, after all?

You might have thought that a boarding school would be too worldly for a girl from our Lucasite church, but it's all right because the school is a very Christian one, and Aunt Josephine goes to a Baptist church, which is better than nothing. She takes Hope there every Sunday.

Anyway, over the slow weeks and months at home, I did gradually get better. I managed to get out of bed without being helped, and then, when my hands were strong enough, I was able to dress myself. Slowly, I learned to take more than a few steps at a time, and at last I was able to go up and down the stairs. By the time Hope came home at the end of the summer term, I was nearly well again, although I still got tired quickly. Also, my left leg and left arm weren't right. I could walk with only a tiny limp, which didn't really show, but when I tried to run I had to hobble along, which was really embarrassing. And my left arm was irritatingly weak. There was no question of me going back to school till after the summer holidays.

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I was so used to Faith and Hope being away that when they *did* come home our small house felt rather cramped. I didn't mind that. Home was just home. I'd lived in it since I was two, after all, and it was all I'd ever known. But I'm sure Mother prayed every day for God to give us something bigger. She must have done, because the only possible explanation for what happened next is that it was an answer to prayer. It came in the form of an envelope from a solicitor on the first Saturday morning in July, after Hope had come home for the holidays.

Dad had just taken a mouthful of porridge when he opened the letter, and as he read it he nearly choked. He passed it down the table to Mother, via Ted and Faith, who were sitting on his right, while Hope and I, on the other side of the table, watched.

Mother read it and went pale.

'Is this a joke?' she said.

'No, it's an answer to prayer!' said Dad with a shining, holy look on his face.

'What? What's happened?' begged Hope. 'Are we going to get a pony?'

Everyone stared at her.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Faith. 'What on earth would we do with a pony?'

'Pass the letter back,' said Dad. 'Let me read it again.'

We waited, holding our breath.

'It seems real enough,' said Dad at last. 'Pringle and Pringle are a well-known firm of solicitors.'

'Yes, but what does it *say*?' I burst out.

‘It seems,’ said Dad, ‘that old Mr Spendlove has very kindly—’

‘Mr Spendlove’s dead,’ I interrupted. ‘You preached at his funeral.’

‘Don’t interrupt, dear,’ said Mother with a frown.

‘. . . that Reg Spendlove has left us his house in his will, including all the contents and furniture!’ continued Dad.

Everyone started talking at once.

‘It’s that big old place up Badger Hill, isn’t it?’

‘Hasn’t it got a peculiar name? Gospel Bells or something?’

‘Gospel Fields, silly.’

‘It’s not the one with the tennis court, is it?’

‘The garden’s enormous!’

‘There’s even a garage! Has he left us his car too?’

Faith hadn’t joined in with all this. She has a suspicious mind.

‘But why?’ she asked Dad, fixing him with a piercing look. ‘Did you perform some secret service for him? Was he a long-lost relative we never knew about? Did he cast his own children off without a shilling? In which case it wouldn’t be fair.’

‘Mr Spendlove had no children and no living relatives,’ Mother said, ‘and anyway it’s not up to us to question the will of the Lord.’ But she spoke automatically. She was clearly as astonished as the rest of us.

‘Does this mean we’re going to *move*?’ My voice ended on a squeak.

Mother was recovering.

‘It’s very kind of Mr Spendlove,’ she said, ‘but it’s out of the question for us to live there. We couldn’t possibly afford it.’

The place is huge. It would cost a fortune in cleaning materials alone!

Dad wasn't listening. He pushed his plate aside, beamed round at us and said, 'Clear the table, girls – and you, Ted, do the washing-up. Then I suggest that we take a walk up the hill to look at our new home.'