

# *Abigail*

## *Chapter 1*

**T**HERE WAS A SECRET – something to do with men and women. Grown-ups knew it; and servants knew it, too. At least, Annie certainly did. And since servants were more vulnerable than other adults, Abigail decided that Annie was going to yield this secret.

It happened one winter day in London when Abigail went out to pay a call in the carriage. The horse cast a shoe, and she sent the coachman, Dilks, to have it reshod while she paid her call. Knowing Dilks's fondness for a drop, she sent Annie along to keep him out of mischief.

In the coachman's case the trick had worked – he had taken drink all right, but not enough to show any effect. But poor Annie, who had matched him glass for glass, and who lacked his practised capacity, had well and truly lost the edge of her sobriety.

At first, Abigail did not realize that this was her chance. The Secret was far from her thoughts. The whiff of gin shocked her. She turned on the maid: "Annie, you've been drinking!"

The girl giggled, but Abigail could see that she was terrified. That terror halted her; she was caught between the righteousness of her anger and what she imagined was a tolerant worldliness.

She had been angry with servants before, of course, but always as a child of the house. Here the situation was hers to be mistress of – but what sort of mistress? Stern, pious, unbending? Aloof and condescending? She had never been either of those. Tolerant worldliness – a weary worldliness – seemed the most inviting, and the most like her.

"Why on earth do you drink gin?" she said. "It's such a tipples."

Annie smiled weakly with relief. "I didn't want to," she said. "But I thought I'd stand a better chance o' gettin' who's'sname, Dilks, out the public if I went in with him like, my lady."

The thought of such forbidden behaviour made Abigail wistful. "Isn't it funny, Annie – you can be so free and yet I'm like a prisoner."

The maid giggled again. "It's 'cos you got to keep your jewels, isn't it!"

"But I haven't come out with any jewels."

Annie clapped her hands and screamed with laughter. Abigail, feeling acutely shut out, wished she had played the stern, unbending mistress when she had the chance.

That was when she remembered The Secret. Suddenly she knew that Annie's laughter was about The Secret. Here was her chance to find out.

She smiled in a way that she knew would provoke the girl first to silence and then to curiosity: a smile of pleasure relived.

“Oh, Annie,” she asked, “did you ever let a man kiss you?”

“Did I!” Annie chuckled. “I should just say so.” Then, remembering why she was there, she asked with tipsy sternness: “And who, may I ask, has been a –kissing of you, my lady?”

Abigail smiled complicitly. “Oh come, where’s the harm?”

“Harm! Where’s the harm! Don’t you know the harm?”

“A little kiss? A few kisses? A few tender embraces? I can see no harm in that.”

“Hah!” Annie exploded. “That’s how it begins. But we all know where it may lead, your ladyship.”

“I’m sure I don’t, Annie. A few more kisses, and a few more?”

“Ah – and *then!*”

“Yes, Annie? And *then?*”

“Then they’ve got you.”

“Where?”

“Right where they want you.”

“What nonsense!” Abigail was disappointed. The Secret evaporated as fast as they uncovered it.

Annie looked at her uncertainly. “You mean you really don’t know? No one never told you?”

“They might have, and I might have forgotten.”

Annie laughed. “Not that, you wouldn’t. Well, here’s a pickle, I must say.”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s right, being in ignorance. Dangerous, I’d call it.” She looked at Abigail again. “Straight? You really don’t know?”

“I don’t believe you know either, Annie. You’re just pretending.”

Annie grinned wickedly. “If I was to say, ‘He worked the hairy oracle’ ... if I was to say, ‘He put Nebuchadnezzar out to graze’ ... If I was to say, ‘She’s seen the elephant ... got jack –in –the –bush ... been shot twixt wind and water’ ...” At each circumlocution she looked at Abigail for some spark of recognition. But Abigail’s bafflement merely revived the comedy in the words – a comedy that usage had long since staled. Annie laughed. “Why, you ain’t got no idea what I’m on about, have you!”

Abigail seethed with resentment. Most annoying of all, the words seemed so rich in meaning, making her feel that she hovered at the very rim of enlightenment. Something within her – something below or beyond the reach of conscious thought – actually understood what Annie was driving at. That unreachable part of her would not be surprised at whatever new truths were about to emerge.

Annie was suddenly glum. “Strike me! I don’t know as if I should tell you.”

“I’ll never tell anyone of it if you do.”

“God’s honour? If Lady Wharfedale was to hear ...”

"I'll never breathe a word." Abigail leaned forward, smiling eagerly to encourage the girl.

"Well ..." Annie sniggered. "It's what men and women best like doing together. And boys and gels. And lords and ladies, I don't doubt. It's your national indoor game, the four-leg frolic, taking on beef ... You sure you don't know, my lady?"

"Not these words. Do get on, Annie. Why d'you beat about the bush so!"

Annie laughed uproariously. "You could say that," she added. "Beat about the bush! Oh yes! You could say that all right." Then seeing Abigail's anger, she went on hastily: "It's when men and women get off their clothes and lie together. Now d'you know?"

Abigail stared at her, openmouthed. She *did* know! Or part of her did know. Part of her was surfacing with that knowledge, leaving the rest of her aghast.

"You know how we're different from them? Well – put that difference together. There now – I can't say it nicer."

"Difference?" Abigail said – though, of course, she knew the difference. On their holidays in Connemara she and her eight brothers and sisters had always swum *au naturel*. She knew the difference very well.

"Where we go in, they ... stick out. Put it together."

"But why?"

Annie smiled, not at her young mistress but at something a hundred miles away. "I daresay it's the greatest fun we ever have."

"But you said it was dangerous."

The word brought Annie back to the here and now. She clutched at Abigail's arm. "And so it is, my lady. For that's how we make new feet for baby stockings. What passes then from them to us at such times is what quickens us."

Abigail gulped audibly. "Like *animals!*"

"Yes, of course." Annie looked affronted. "You said you never knew."

"Well, I knew about animals, naturally." She gazed out at the passing houses – those houses her mother's property firm had built, the houses she despised so heartily – and a new element of horror was suddenly added to them.

For now she saw those thin, fallen-chested clerks and their pasty, adenoidal wives lying naked side by side in all those mean upstairs rooms, doing what bulls and cows did, doing what stallions and mares did, and daring to say – like Annie – that it was the greatest fun they ever had. It was ... loathsome, noisome ... noxious. It was vile.

She looked back at Annie, bearer of these dreadful tidings. "Have you ... did you ... ever?" she asked, blushing hotly.

Annie licked her lower lip uncertainly. "Is it truth you want, my lady? Or a servant's answer?"

"A servant should always be truthful."

Annie laughed bitterly. “And there’s many a servant girl now walking the streets for no more than a telling of the simple truth.”

Walking the streets! The full meaning of that phrase now struck Abigail. One saw the girls everywhere, of course – or rather, one saw them and did not see them. They were never discussed, yet were constantly written about in the newspapers. The Social Evil. The Great Evil. So that’s who they were! Dismissed servant girls who, having nothing to lose, had abandoned themselves to ‘the greatest fun we ever have’!

“Well, I shall never dismiss you for telling the truth, Annie,” she said.

Annie considered the promise before she continued. “I was born in Hackney, my lady. Our dad was a billposter, which pays about half a farthing above portering. We were in and out the workhouse all our lives and when we were out, like as not we’d have a room, just one room, for all ten of us – and we’d have to keep a lodger, or starve. Sometimes we starved even with a lodger.”

“But my mother said you came from an orphanage.”

“That’s right, my lady. When a family goes into a workhouse, the father goes to the men’s, the mother to the women’s, and the young ’uns to the orphanage. Last time we was in was ten months. I never seen our dad, nor ...”

“But how dreadful! Your parents simply abandoned you? They made no attempt to see you?”

“Course they didn’t! It would’ve been death to them.”

“Death?”

“They’d’ve been slung out, wouldn’t they? And never no more let back.”

“Just for trying to see you?”

“Or each other. I’ve heard tell of a soft work’us over the river where men and wives may speak through iron gratings six foot apart, that they may not touch, but I never did see it.”

“Oh, Annie!” Abigail involuntarily clutched the girl’s hand and squeezed it. “I had no idea.”

“Huh!” Annie was bragging now. “We were like kings compared to some. But to answer your question, my lady, when ten shares a room they cannot keep secret what has been kept secret from you until now. Nor may they preserve the jewels such as you have preserved.”

Luckily for Abigail it was several days before Annie’s meaning broke through the still –considerable mists of bafflement and semiunderstanding. She was thoughtful and silent for so long that Annie eventually had to say, “I hope but what I did right, my lady. Speaking as I did.”

Abigail fixed her with the most earnest gaze and said, “I want you always to tell me the truth, Annie. I intend to be a writer, as you know. And there are so many things to find out that I cannot find out in books. Like these things you have told me. I need to know them all.”

Annie smiled and relaxed, promising she would always tell the unvarnished truth when it was demanded of her.

At that moment they happened to be passing down Piccadilly, near the end of their journey home. To test this new resolve, Abigail pointed at all the gaudy women who are seen and not –seen. “These ... creatures,” she said. “They are what you’re talking about, too.”

Annie looked out at them with something in her eye that was neither contempt nor envy but a bit of both. “That’s the money side of it,” she said.

“Money?”

“They go with gentlemen, they do what the gentlemen like, and the gentlemen pay them. That’s the way of it.”

“Oh.” Abigail was feeling weak at this surfeit of revelation.

“Half hour from now,” Annie said, pointing at a girl who had just taken on a man, “that gel – that blowsabella, as we call them – will be richer by as much as I earn in a week – maybe two weeks.”

“But why!”

“Makes you think, don’t it!”

“I don’t understand it.”

“Men go mad to lift a gel’s skirts. There’s times when they’d do anything to get across us. Why, in my last place ...” She glanced nervously at Abigail, wondering if perhaps honesty might already have reached its bounds for today.

But Abigail was looking out of the carriage window in disgust. “You mean that ... that girl doesn’t know that man? Has never seen him before?”

“Probably not.”

“Oh, but how dreadful! How can she?”

“As long as there’s gentlemen prowling like the wolves they are, she can.”

“Gentlemen? What gentlemen? What do *you* know of gentlemen? I have been to many dances with gentlemen and have talked for hours with gentlemen of every kind at my mother’s salons, and never have I received so much as a hint of any of this. I begin to doubt all you have told me now.”

Annie smiled tolerantly. “Not to *you*. Of course they wouldn’t show it. But where d’you think they work it off! They try to get about us servants in dark corners. And they come down here to the West End. And the East End. And North and South Ends, too, if there are such places. For there’s gay women and gay houses everywhere.”

“Stop it!” Abigail commanded. “I don’t want to hear any more of this.”

She was trembling and unaccountably near to tears as she ran up the front steps of Hamilton Place to the secure and, she fancied, innocent warmth of her mother’s drawing room.