

Crissy's Family

Chapter 1

WHEN A MOTHER DIES she takes the heart out of the family and carries it with her into her grave. Even as I watched my mother's box (it was too mean to dignify with the name of coffin) being lowered into her grave on that chill March afternoon in Helston churchyard, I knew our family had died with her. My father, whose drunken behaviour had done so much to hasten her end, could not even keep himself sober for that most solemn sabbath in our family's life. As the gravediggers lowered the box into its final place of rest, he fell over, knocking poor little Teresa to the ground with him. It was her birthday, too, I remember. What a present for a little maid offive!

She began to cry at the pain from her crippled hip, caused by that same consumption which carried our mother off. My father, no doubt thinking in his fuddled way to lighten the situation, giggled and tried to tickle her to make her laugh. Meanwhile the curate and the gravediggers looked on in disgust and we five children stared at the two of them, sprawled in the snow, and burned with our shame.

Marian picked up Teresa and hugged her tight. I reached out and stroked her curls with the backs of my fingers. Our father stayed where he was, coughing and panting heavily. No one cared to help him and he fell asleep before the burial was over. We stood around the grave — Marian, still holding Teresa, me, Gerald, Tom, and Arthur — and watched while they filled in the hole, all the way to the top. We could not think what else to do. When they finished, each man gave the mound of soil a little pat with his shovel, as if for comfort, and one of them said to us, "That's over and done with now."

We looked forlornly at each other and then at our snoring father. I took a few reluctant paces toward him, intending to shake him back to life, but Marian said, quite sharply, "No!" Just that. She didn't say to leave him to sleep it off ... or some such explanation to soften that one harsh word. Just *No!* And she is usually the gayest and most light-hearted maid.

We left him there and never saw him alive again.

I felt someone should say something personal about our mother. The curate had been engaged by the Poor Law Infirmary where she had died. He hadn't known her personally, so his words, though adequate, had been rather general. I said, "She was one of the noblest of women, but only we are left to remember her. We must try not to forget what a wonderful

mother she was to us, not ever.” Then a lump filled my throat and I could not continue.

Tom giggled and then looked away because his eyes, too, had filled with tears. Gerald and Arthur just stared at the mound and nodded. Marian hefted Teresa onto her other hip and said, “I suppose I shall have to carry you, little pig.” We were all taking care to speak very properly, out of deference to our mother, who was ‘high-quarter’ by birth and hated to hear us speak in slovenly dialect.

We had no money for the bus back to Porthleven so we set out to walk the two-and-a-bit miles home. Teresa’s hip hurt her sorely and she was very fretful, even though Marian was carrying her. Half-way up the hill I saw my sister was exhausted, so I took the little child piggyback until she said it gave her ‘wonders in her legs,’ which was Cornish for pins-and-needles. Then Mr Chigwidden of Sunset Farm came past with an empty wagon (it being Sunday) and took pity on us for once, and so we got a good ride almost all the way home. We were scrupulous to thank him, especially after what Gerald and Arthur had done to his hay mowie.

Our little cottage was perched upon the cliff top in the part of Porthleven called Gravesend, just below Sunset Farm. As we set off down the last bit of the lane I turned round to see why Chigwidden wasn’t moving, for I could not hear his cartwheels. He was just sitting there, staring after us with the saddest expression. I’ve often wondered since if he was thinking of adopting us, for he and his wife were not blessed with children — and what a different tale I’d have to tell if he’d done so. There is no legal adoption in England, of course. We aren’t like the French, who want the law to control everything. But plenty of it goes on with the blessing of the Poor Law guardians, and to the torment of any private citizen who tries to oppose them.

Seeing Chigwidden sitting there, looking so sad, rekindled a feeling I’d had in the churchyard — that we were doomed as a family. Because of our mother’s illness the Poor Law Guardians were now aware of us. There was a shiver in my backbone as I trotted to catch up with my brothers and sisters. It was as if I could feel those invisible forces of institutional charity gathering in our wake and preparing to visit us with their cold good intentions. Something told me these were our last days together and I must cherish and treasure each moment.

That night, when I should have prayed for the repose of our dear mother’s soul, I could think of no other blessing to ask of Almighty God than to let the six of us go on living together somehow. Surely nothing could have given her soul greater repose than that? And it should have been possible. We worked it out that evening after the younger ones had gone to bed, Marian, me, and Tom, though he was little help. Men may end up wiser than women (though even that I doubt) but at twelve they are no

match.

Marian was seventeen — would turn eighteen in September. I had just turned sixteen. And Tom would be thirteen in August. He could leave school now if her liked — in fact, whether he liked it or not, he'd have to. Our mother had given us a far better education than most other poor children could hope for. We were well-spoken. We wrote with passable hands, spelled correctly, could keep simple accounts. Marian and I could sew neatly. We knew the ways of high-quarter folk even if we had not the means to follow them in our own lives. And we were scrupulous in person and clothing. All in all, then, we decided, we three older ones should be able to find work enough to bring in a pound a week between us. If we ate one meal a day at our place of employment, we should be able to get by. And if we took home some kind of outwork — needlework, copying, writing envelopes, bunching flowers for market, and so on — we should be able also to cope with the disasters of life, too, like children growing out of their clothes, and boots whose uppers and soles part company after only a couple of dozen patchings.

Not one of us even mentioned our father — as if the simple act of speaking his name would conjure him up. He was a blight on our life. We, the three eldest, were the breadwinners now.

I was teaching at the Dame school then for five shillings a week, so I'd have to seek better wages than that — or five shillings plus board and lodging. Marian had helped our mother with the washing she took in, but, without her, that would not pay. So none of us had been in really worthwhile employment before.

We therefore determined that I should try my luck in Helston while Marian and Tom took turns to go into Porthleven — so there'd always be one of them at home with the children. They thought me very noble, volunteering to do that long walk up and down two steep hills, especially as I'd have to do it twice every day if I gained a place in the town. I said nothing as to my real purpose, which was to visit our mother's grave and tell her of our decision. The curate had said she was beyond pain but I didn't think that meant the same as beyond caring.

The snow had melted overnight but the damp wind made that Monday morning seem even colder and I was thankful for our stout Cornish "hedges," which are, in fact stone walls, a yard or more thick and mortared with earth and greenery. I shivered as I entered the churchyard — a premonition, though I thought it was just the chill. So the sight of our father's body, lying where he had fallen in his stupor yesterday, hardly surprised me. If it stirred any feelings within me, I no longer recall them. I think I must have been numbed beyond grief by then, for I did not go to him at all. I knelt at the grave side and prayed, and spoke to my mother, as if he were not lying there, a mere dozen paces away. She must know he was

there, anyway. She knew everything now.

As I rose to leave — intending to start my search at the domestic employment agency in Meneage Street — I heard her voice say quite distinctly inside my head: “Go to your grandparents, Cristobel.” She never called me Crissy, like everyone else. “Mister and Mrs William Trevarton, Fenton Lodge, Swanpool, Falmouth.” That proves it was my mother speaking, because, although I knew her parents lived in Falmouth, I had no idea of their exact directions. Clever people scoff at me for believing this. They tell me I must have heard it at some time and forgotten it. I don’t argue. People are free to believe what they want, and I believe I heard my mother’s voice telling me to call on her parents somewhere. It wasn’t anything spooky, like her voice coming from a great cavern or anything like that. It was just her ordinary, everyday voice talking in normal, measured tones and inside my head, as I said. I found it very comforting and my spirit was uplifted — except that Falmouth was about fifteen miles away and I had no money for the bus fare.

I was leaving by the churchyard gate when I remembered my father’s body still lying there. I recall it with shame — except that it is a measure of the poverty and desperation into which his drunkenness and indolence had plunged us — but my only thought then was to return and go through his pockets for any money he might have left over from his last binge. I did so, and found three shillings, which fed us well that evening. But I should have done better to find a shovel somewhere and open my mother’s grave and put him into it, too. For it was the discovery of his corpse that led to all our troubles. Indeed, if we had been more worldly-wise, we should have dragged him home with us the previous day and kept him alive by whatever means. For while a father lived, no matter how drunken or wretched, the Guardians would leave his family alone. And our little family was all we had left in the world that was good.