
POOR
GIRLS

ALSO BY CLARE WHITFIELD

People of Abandoned Character
The Gone and the Forgotten

POOR GIRLS

CLARE WHITFIELD

HEAD OF ZEUS

An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Clare Whitfield, 2024

The moral right of Clare Whitfield to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of both the copyright owner
and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781837930869
ISBN (Goldsboro HB): 9781035916368
ISBN (XTPB): 9781837930876
ISBN (E): 9781837930845

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

This fictional story is inspired by the real women in The Forty Elephants, as led by Queen Alice Diamond.

To the young!
May you laugh at our mistakes
but never repeat them.

PROLOGUE

SERVE, STEAL OR STARVE.

Choose one, or all three, but these are your only choices.

Starving has its obvious disadvantages. Serve? Then choose your master wisely. As a woman in England, 1922, be sure to seek out a benign ruler. But should you opt to steal, you could live like a queen – until you get caught, that is.

The mighty British Empire is in shock and mourning, crippled by debt and inflation, turgid with grief as the Great War turned unimaginable horrors into reality. When giant monsters of machinery tore their way across Europe, grinding men into dust. Now it is over, those of us still standing are angry and divided. Different generations may as well be alien to each other and are to be regarded with suspicion and fear. Rich and poor women, lost sons, brothers and fathers. But the old grey men who led the country from ivory towers ordered us to return to the ways

of before. The wealthy clutched their pearls and retreated to their familiar customs.

But the young had seen what war had to offer. Then came the deadly Spanish flu, inflation, food shortages, unemployment, poverty. The children had run out of fear in the schoolyard. We were starving and lustful, cavalier to those who held their own mortality so sacrosanct. We were on fire! We would deny ourselves nothing, because tomorrow, who knew what horror those silly old fools would bring upon us.

We were never destined to have anything, that was a given, so you know what we did? We took it anyway.

3rd March 1911

Mrs Mackridge,

Today your youngest, Eleanor, received four strikes of the cane. Even during punishment, she maintained a resolute defiance and professed a wish to not be a young lady when she grows up!

The reason for today's punishment is that Eleanor was seen wilfully exposing her bloomers by hanging upside down from a tree alongside a boy at playtime.

As we have discussed on prior occasions, Eleanor is a capable young girl. Perhaps even one of the brightest in the class, but she has within her a rebellious streak that must be tamed. While Eleanor clearly understands the rules, she insists on questioning each and every one, defying them, especially if she thinks this will gain herself attention. Eleanor has shown time and time again that she remains unable, or unwilling, to show restraint when it comes to indulging her sense of mischief. She is never satisfied and always restless. I fear her boisterous appetite for adventure may inevitably cause her a mischief. She lacks self-discipline and I, for one, would welcome a discussion on how to control these troublesome aspects of her character, as the girl seems impervious to the cane.

Frankly, I fear for Eleanor's future. I do not believe her to be a wicked girl, but when she comes of age and must enter into service, I fear such qualities will inevitably lead her to a troubled existence.

Yours sincerely,
Miss V. Williams, Schoolmistress

CHAPTER ONE

Brighton, England, October 1922

IT WAS COMING UP TO THE END OF HER FIRST BUSY Friday shift at the Grand Hotel. Eleanor had been stitched up with the busiest section of sixteen tables – a baptism of fire for amusement. Sixteen unfamiliar tables in an unfamiliar restaurant that she must wait on dressed up in the fussiest, most old-fashioned uniform, with corset, lace collar, puffed sleeves and frilly cap. To top it all, it was itchy. She felt like a right pillock, but the wages were better, so one must suffer for the greater good.

The Victorian Terrace at the Grand Hotel had a veranda facing the seafront. The Terrace specialised in high teas, freshly baked cakes, finger sandwiches and scones – that sort of thing. It was much posher than her previous employer, the Lyons Tearoom, but that was due to be shut down with a new one opening up on James Street, so it seemed a good time to move on. Eleanor had been a waitress since being let go from the munitions factory, as all the girls had when the war ended. She was a pretty good waitress, fast on her feet, good memory and fit, having built up calves of rock

and feet that could walk over broken glass. The Victorian Terrace restaurant, however, was tricky. It had many shady nooks and crannies and, being new, she was still trying to find the most efficient rotation of the floor, depending on how many covers were on. Table two had only just sat down and were looking at the menu. Table four could likely do with more drinks and table eleven had asked for the bill. A noisy little boy with what appeared to be his mother and grandmother sat on table eight. The table had become cluttered and needed to be cleared before something ended up on the floor, but Eleanor had a tray full of dirty glassware and empty soda bottles to get rid of.

'Eleanor,' Miss Larson, the manager, snapped, 'Table two are waiting to order.'

'They said they needed more time, Miss Larson.' Eleanor emptied the tray of glass as Miss Larson watched, arms folded. She liked to stay pinned to the cash register, much like a prison warden, with her set of keys on a long full skirt that didn't suit her.

'They look bored if you ask me.'

'Yes, Miss Larson.' *Three bags full, Miss Larson. Think of the money, Eleanor.*

'Leave those and get back there.'

'Yes, Miss Larson,' she said again, sounding like a flipping parrot.

Eleanor spun on her heels and glided over to table two, taking her notepad out of the impractically small apron and a pencil out of her hair. She'd already been told off once for keeping her pencil there and hoped Miss Larson hadn't caught her doing it again. The hard-faced woman was all over her. She struck Eleanor as one of those tough birds

that had thrived during the war. Had a demanding job, wore trousers, commanded respect and now found herself back wearing ridiculous skirts and serving her betters. It is a universal truth that all managers are bastards when you first start, trying to sniff out a bad attitude or a cut corner. The staff at Lyons had been more friendly whereas the staff at the Grand were stuffed kippers, but the clientele was much classier and the tips better. *Think of the tips, think of the tips.*

The Grand may be the most luxurious hotel in Brighton, but it didn't stop it being infamous for dirty weekenders. It is a somewhat lesser-known fact that the well-to-do are the most badly behaved. If you had a mind for people watching, you could see all sorts of odd pairs checking in under false names. They might be married, but not necessarily to each other. It could be an effort to keep a poker face when a mismatched pair with an obvious gap in age or status appeared, with many young ladies, and a few men, being of the professional variety. This reputation meant privileged young men could be predatory in their behaviour, especially when it came to working-class girls. Not that this was anything new to Eleanor. She was no innocent. There couldn't be one left in the country after the last few years.

Eleanor took table two's order and didn't even realise she was smiling to herself until she caught the eye of a dark gentleman smiling back as if her smile were for him. Eleanor let her face fall and looked away. The man was sat alone at a table for two in a shady little nook by the window, not in her section. A shame, for it had not escaped her attention how attractive he was. He was half obscured by a meddlesome marble pillar, and when she did catch sight of

him, he gazed out to sea, which only added to the intrigue of the mysterious well-groomed gentleman. Eleanor made her way back to Miss Larson at the register and stole a peek at the man on her way. Her eyes crawled from high-polished shoes to head as he sat facing the blustery ocean. It was October and wet and windy, but there was something romantic about the wind whipping up a hoolie as the waves crashed onto the pebbled shoreline – as long as Eleanor was indoors. The man was mid-twenties with glossy black hair parted on one side. Dark suit, wool, white shirt and burgundy tie, gold tie pin and cufflinks. But he did hold his teacup with a pinkie sticking out with a signet ring – a little on the gaudy side. He must be a new money man, or a black marketeer.

'Waitress!' called the grandmother on table eight, pulling Eleanor from her mindless trance. She rushed over. 'Clear this table, we can barely move. Such small tables you have.'

'They do it intentionally, Mother, so they can cram more people in, like sardines,' said the younger woman – by the resemblance, she assumed, the older woman's daughter.

'Of course, madam,' Eleanor said, 'I'll fetch a tray.' If only walking wasn't so impossible in this bloody skirt; it was like wearing a Christmas tree.

King George V had been on the throne since 1910 but the uniform was stuck in the 1890s, when Victoria was still kicking. It was on purpose, of course: everything about the Grand was designed to pander to the nostalgia held by the upper classes for all things from the last century. It was even affectionately called *palace by the sea*.

Eleanor snatched up a tray from the bar and flew back to the table as the boy managed to knock off a piece of

Victoria sponge cake, china smashing, well-heeled heads stopping to sneer at the disruption.

'Heavens! This is exactly what I feared,' prevailed the grandmother.

'I shall clear it, madam, it'll only take a moment.'

Miss Larson marched over with a dustpan and brush. Eleanor was on the floor on her knees, scooping chunks of broken cake from the floor when she felt a hard whack on her behind and kneeled bolt upright, nearly banging her head on the table. Grinning and with a wet bottom lip, the little boy brandished a dessert spoon covered in cream, which Eleanor had to assume was now on the back of her skirt. Little sod must have been at least eight – old enough to know better.

'If you'd done your job properly in the first place,' asserted the grandmother, looking down her hawk-like nose, 'none of this would have happened.' She had the ice-cold smile of the impenetrably wealthy.

Eleanor didn't say a word, as expected. She kept her eyes to the floor and wiped away streaks of jam, flicked buttercream off her fingers into the dustpan and got to her feet.

'Is there anything else I can do, madam?'

'The bill, right away.'

'Of course.'

Eleanor asked Miss Larson to ring up the bill, made a prompt return to the table and had taken a few steps when the grandmother called her back.

'What's this?' she asked, pointing at the bill.

'I'm sorry, madam?'

'You've had the cheek to charge us for the cake that

ended up on the floor. Take it off, I shan't be paying for your mistakes.' She slapped the slip down on the silver salver and pushed it towards her. To her daughter she said, 'Honestly, you have to watch these girls nowadays.'

In a bit of a panic, Eleanor ran back to Miss Larson, feeling herself getting hot under all the layers.

'Miss Larson, table eight has said I need to take the Victoria sponge off, what should I do?'

'Take it off, can't have an unhappy customer, can we?'

'Right, oh, it's just that when I was at the Lyons…'

'It'll come off your wages.'

'…what?'

'And the crockery. Here, there you are, I've rung it up for you.' Miss Larson thrust the new bill at her, so she had to reach up under her chin to take it. Wonderful: third shift and already docked wages.

She'd spent so long fussing with table eight that the others had been neglected and three were waving at her. The grandmother had gone to the ladies, and it was the mother who settled the bill. As Eleanor accepted the salver, the mother kept a firm grip until Eleanor looked her in the face.

'Keep the change,' she said, with a frigid smile. A pleasant surprise, she hadn't expected to get one.

'Thank you very much, miss.'

'Mother can be a bit of an old stickler about service, but you should be careful, what do you expect to happen if you offer your behind to the sky like that? Boys will be boys.'

The woman dragged her handsy little son towards where her mother was being helped into a lavender coat. The two women dressed nearly identically: long skirts, high neck

blouses, matching wide brim hats. The little goblin looked back, grinning at Eleanor.

'Waitress! Can we have service, please?' a table called. Lord, what she would give to be back in the Lyons. *Think of the money, think of the money, think of the money.*

Eleanor drew breath and masked herself with the face of the willing to please. On her way to the table, she was disappointed to find the mysterious dark gentleman had disappeared and was surprised by her reaction. It was boredom, not that she wasn't busy, but the tasks were so incredibly dull, it was nice to have a daydream. Sometimes she wanted to scream and would look for glimmers of excitement in silly places. All in the hope that one day, if she kept bloody looking, something might happen.