The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets

Eva Rice

Chapter 1

THE GIRL IN THE GREEN COAT

I

I met Charlotte in London one afternoon while waiting for a bus. Just look at that sentence! That in itself is the first extraordinary thing, as I took the bus as rarely as once or twice a year, and even then it was only for the novelty value of not travelling in a car or train. It was mid-November 1954, and as cold as I had ever known London. Too cold to snow, my brother used to say on such days, something that I had never under¬stood. I was wearing my beautiful old fur-lined coat from Whiteleys and a pair of Fair Isle gloves that one of Inigo's friends had left at Magna the weekend before, so was feeling quite well disposed towards the arctic conditions. There I was, thinking about Johnnie Ray and waiting patiently with two old ladies, one boy of about fourteen and a young mother and her baby, when my thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a stick-thin girl wearing a long, sea-green coat. She was almost as tall as me, which caught my attention straight away as I am just about six foot with my shoes on. She stood in front of all of us, and cleared her throat.

'Anyone want to share a taxi?' she demanded. 'I can't sit around here all day waiting.' She spoke loudly and quickly and without a hint of self-consciousness and it was instantly clear to me that although the girl was addressing us all, it was me she wanted to accept her offer. The fourteen-year-old boy opened his mouth and closed it again, then blushed and dug his hands into his pockets. One of the elderly ladies muttered, 'No, thank you,' and the other I think must have been deaf, because her expression remained unaltered by the proposal. The young mother shook her head with a smile of infinite regret that stayed in my mind's eye long after the day had ended. I shrugged.

'Where are you going?' I asked pointlessly.

'Oh, you darling! Come on.' The girl darted into the middle of the road and stuck out a hand to hail a cab. Within seconds one had pulled up beside her.

'Come on!' she cried.

'Hang on a second! Where are you going?' I demanded for the second time, thoroughly flustered and wishing that I had never opened my mouth in the first place.

'Oh, for goodness' sake just jump in!' she ordered, opening the door of the taxi. For a few seconds in time the whole world seemed to hesitate under starter's orders.

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Somewhere in a parallel universe, I heard myself shout out that I had changed my mind and that she must go on alone. Of course, in reality, I leapt forward and into the cab beside her just as the lights changed and we were off.

'Yikes!' she exclaimed. 'I thought you'd never move!'

She didn't turn to speak to me, but faced straight ahead, staring out in the direction that we were going. I didn't reply at once, but took in the glory of her profile – the smooth milky pale skin, the long curling eyelashes and the thick, thick, straight heavy dark blond hair that fell well below her shoulders. She looked a little older than me, but I sensed from the way that she talked that she was probably about a year younger. She sat very still, her big mouth set in a small smile.

'Where are you going?' I asked again.

'Is that all you can say?'

'I'll stop asking it when you give me an answer.'

'I'm going to Kensington. I'm having tea with Aunt Clare and Harry, which is just too impossible for words, so I should like you to come with me, and we'll have a lovely afternoon. Oh, and my name's Charlotte by the way.'

That was how she said it. Straight Alice in Wonderland. Of course, me being me, I was flattered by her absurd presumption, first, that I would be happy to accompany her, and second, that it would be a lovely afternoon if I did.

'I have to read through Act Four of Antony and Cleopatra by five o'clock,' I said, hoping to appear slightly aloof.

'Oh, it's an absolute cinch,' she said. 'He dies, she kills herself with an asp. "Bring me my robe and my crown, I have immortal longings in me,"' she quoted softly. 'You have to admire a woman who chooses to end her life with a snakebite, don't you? Attention seeking, Aunt Clare would call it. I think it's the most glamorous way to go.'

'Hard to do in England,' I said reasonably. 'Not many serpents hanging about in west London.'

'There are plenty in west London,' said Charlotte briskly. 'I had dinner with one last night.'

I laughed. 'Who was that?'

'My mother's latest conquest. He insisted on feeding her forkfuls of shepherd's pie as though she were three years old. She wouldn't stop giggling as though it were quite the most hilarious thing that had ever happened. I must remember not to dine with her again this year,' she mused, taking out a notebook and pencil. 'What's more, her new beau was nothing at all like he is in the orchestra pit.'

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'Orchestra pit?'

'He's a conductor called Michael Hollowman. I suppose you're going to go all sophisticated and tell me you know exactly who he is and wasn't his interpretation of Rigoletto remarkable?'

'It was, if a little hurried and lacking in emotion,' I said.

Charlotte stared at me and I grinned.

'I'm joking,' I admitted.

'Thank goodnesss for that. I think I would have had to with¬draw my invitation right away if you hadn't been,' said Charlotte.

It had started to rain and the traffic was worsening.

'Who are Aunt Clare and Harry?' I asked, curiosity winning hands down over practicalities like the fact that we were travelling in quite the opposite direction to Paddington. Charlotte sighed.

'Aunt Clare is really my mother. I mean, she's not my mother, she's my mother's sister, but my mother has given up on everything in life except for men with batons who she believes will help further her career. She's got it into her head that she's a great, untrained singer,' she said grimly.

'And is she?'

'She's certainly got the untrained bit right. She's very neurotic about everything except for what happens to me, which is rather convenient as we have nothing in common at all – except for our delusions of grandeur – so I spend most of my time at Aunt Clare's and as little time as possible at home.'

'And where is home?' I asked, sounding just like my grand¬mother.

'Clapham,' said Charlotte.

'Oh.'

She might as well have said Venus. I had heard of it, but had no idea where Clapham was.

'Anyway, Aunt Clare is writing her memoirs at the moment,' she went on. 'I'm helping her. By that I mean that I'm just listening to her talk and typing what she says. She's paying me a pittance because she thinks I should be honoured to have the job. She says plenty of people would give their eye teeth to hear stories like hers from the horse's mouth, so to speak.'

'I don't doubt it,' I said. 'And Harry?'

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Charlotte turned to face me. 'Aunt Clare was married to a very smart man called Samuel Delancy until three years ago. One of those fearfully good-looking but very mean types. Anyway, he was killed by a falling bookcase.'

'No!'

'Yes, really, it just collapsed on his head as he sat reading On The Origin of Species – very ironic my mother kept saying – and as a result Aunt Clare inherited an awful lot of debt and not much else. He was a pretty scary sort of man with a club foot to boot – ha ha, if you'll pardon the pun. Harry is their only son; he's twenty-five and convinced that the whole world is conspiring against him. It's very dull indeed.'

'I'm happy to share the taxi with you but I don't make a habit of having tea with complete strangers,' I said unconvincingly.

'Oh, good gracious, I'm not asking you to make a habit of it. But do come. Please! For me!' Charlotte implored.

Although that was an absurd reason for me to accompany her as we had only met a few minutes ago, it had the desired effect. There was something in the way that this creature spoke, some¬¬¬thing in the way that she carried herself, that made me quite certain that no one would ever be able to refuse her any¬thing, regardless of whether they had known her for five minutes or fifty years. In that sense, she reminded me, very strongly, of my brother. I felt I was staring in at the taxi from the street and I saw myself beguiling, intriguing – because I was in Charlotte's company, and a girl like Charlotte would not have singled me out for tea without thinking that there was something interesting about me, surely? She had quite the reverse effect on me that had the Alicias and Susans and Jennifers of the debutante circuit. With those girls, I felt myself diminish, sensed my shadow growing smaller, my vision narrowing, until a great dread came over me that if I wasn't careful, I would lose sight of every original thought I had ever had. Charlotte, however, was all possibilities. She was the sort of person one reads about in novels yet rarely meets in real life, and if this was the beginning of the novel – well! I was pretty certain I wasn't supposed to get out of the cab until we pulled up outside the mysterious Aunt Clare's house for tea. I had always been a great believer in fate, but it had never believed in me until that afternoon. But I didn't want Charlotte to think she had won me over that easily . . .

'You're very persistent. I'm not sure that I should trust you one bit,' I said loftily,

'Oh, you don't have to trust me. I've always considered trust¬worthy people to be very boring indeed, and oh my gosh I know some boring people. I just want you to help me. There is a difference.'

'Have you no other friends you could take along with you?' I asked.

'No fun.'

'What do you mean?'

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She tutted with frustration. ‘Look. I can’t make you come with me. If you can’t bear the thought of it, well, that’s just fine. Only you’ll always wonder about it, won’t you? You’ll be lying awake tonight thinking, “Hmmm – I wonder what Aunt Clare was wear¬ing? I wonder if she really was a monster? I wonder if Harry is the most handsome boy in London?” But you’ll never know, because it will be too late, and I won’t come looking for you again.’

‘Is he?’ I asked, full of suspicion.

‘What?’

‘Is he the most handsome boy in London?’

‘Oh no! Of course not!’ At least Charlotte had the grace to laugh at herself, a surprisingly loud, harsh sound like a motor¬cycle starting. ‘He’s not at all handsome, but he’s by far the most interesting boy you’ll ever meet. You’ll love him,’ she added simply. ‘Everyone does, after a while. He’s irritatingly addictive.’

‘Don’t be silly.’ I was cross with myself for asking about him.

‘Aunt Clare always has excellent tea,’ went on Charlotte, ‘stacks of butter and raspberry jam and Eccles cakes and all the ginger scones you can eat. My mother has never understood the importance of a good tea.’

The cab was rocketing along Bayswater Road now.

‘Well I can’t stay for long,’ I said unconvincingly.

‘Of course not.’

We sat in silence for a moment, and I thought that she would ask me my name next, but she didn’t and I later realised that it simply wouldn’t have occurred to her that she should have. I had experi¬enced, for the first time, Charlotte’s great gift for circum¬navigating normal behaviour.

‘I knew you would take the taxi with me,’ she was saying now. ‘I saw you waiting for the bus from the other side of the street, and I thought now there’s a girl who would be perfect for tea with Aunt Clare and Harry.’

I wasn’t quite sure how to take this, so I frowned.

‘Just perfect!’ said Charlotte again. ‘And gosh! I adore your beautiful coat, too.’ She fingered the fur collar. ‘What craftsman¬ship! I make my own clothes. It’s become an addiction. My poor mother can’t understand me at all. She says it will frighten any sensible men off if they think I spend long hours at the sewing machine like some spinster from D. H. Lawrence. I told her that I don’t mind as I’m not in the least bit interested in sensible men in any case.’

‘Quite right,’ I agreed. ‘So what do you make?’

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'Well, I made this coat out of an old travelling rug,' Charlotte confessed. 'Aunt Clare tells me I'm terrifically enterprising in a voice that means she thinks I'm terrifically vulgar.'

'Travelling rug?' I said in amazement. 'But it's a wonderful coat!'

I looked at her with new respect. There was obviously a steely work ethic beneath her flighty exterior, and a steely work ethic (being something I am entirely lacking) is something I admire greatly in others.

'It took me for ever and the pockets are a bit shabby but it's not a bad job,' said Charlotte. 'But when I see a coat like yours! Well! It's in another league entirely.'

'You can wear it to tea, if you like,' I was astonished to find myself saying. Charlotte hesitated.

'May I really? You don't mind? It would be such a treat.' She began unbuttoning her green coat before I could change my mind.

'Here! You try mine,' she said, handing it to me.

Charlotte's coat was exquisitely comfortable and warm. It seemed a little slice of her had stayed hidden in its lining, and it felt strange, like putting on a mask. She wriggled into my coat, pulling her mass of hair over the collar. The effect shocked me, not least because she possessed the actress's ability to change the aura around her simply by altering her clothing. It was as if she had been given her costume for the evening and she was instantly immersed in her part.

'Thank you,' she said softly. 'Do I look a little richer?' She giggled.

'Yes,' I answered truthfully.

'Oh! Here we are!' said Charlotte happily. 'How extraordinary. No, no, I'm paying. It's the very least I can do. I feel a great generosity of spirit has come upon me.'

We had stopped outside one of those large, rather ugly red brick houses off Kensington High Street. As I stepped out of the cab, the wind whipped right through the green coat and seemed to cut right through me. Sure enough, Charlotte paid, dropping a shoal of coins from her long fingers into the hand of the driver with the air of a princess bestowing thanks on her footman. I swear I saw the driver bow his head to her before he drove off again. She took my arm and led me up the steps to the house and rang the bell.

'Aunt Clare lives on the top two floors of this monster,' explained Charlotte. 'After Uncle Samuel died and she'd dealt with all his debts, it was all she could afford. She's quite happy here. Like all intelligent people, she functions very well in extreme disorder.'

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The door was answered by a plump girl in her late teens who offered a very dirty look before leading us up two flights of grubby-looking stairs and into Aunt Clare's flat before vanishing, wordless.

'Phoebe,' said Charlotte. 'Silly girl. She's madly in love with Harry which is too pointless for words.'

'Poor thing,' I said sympathetically.

'Not at all,' scorned Charlotte. 'Aunt Clare took her on to help her out for a few months after my uncle died and she's still here now, earning more than she's worth, I can tell you. She never speaks to me, though I gather she quotes long passages from Paradise Lost to Harry whenever he sits still.' She smiled up at me. 'Now don't run away, for goodness' sake. I'll be back before you know it.'

Then she vanished. And that was how I came to spend my first afternoon in Aunt Clare's study.

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