

Christopher and Columbus

by

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CHAPTER I

Their names were really Anna-Rose and Anna-Felicitas; but they decided, as they sat huddled together in a corner of the second-class deck of the American liner *St. Luke*, and watched the dirty water of the Mersey slipping past and the Liverpool landing-stage disappearing into mist, and felt that it was comfortless and cold, and knew they hadn't got a father or a mother, and remembered that they were aliens, and realized that in front of them lay a great deal of gray, uneasy, dreadfully wet sea, endless stretches of it, days and days of it, with waves on top of it to make them sick and submarines beneath it to kill them if they could, and knew that they hadn't the remotest idea, not the very remotest, what was before them when and if they did get across to the other side, and knew that they were refugees, castaways, derelicts, two wretched little Germans who were neither really Germans nor really English because they so unfortunately, so complicatedly were both,—they decided, looking very calm and determined and sitting very close together beneath the rug their English aunt had given them to put round their miserable alien legs, that what they really were, were Christopher and Columbus, because they were setting out to discover a New World.

"It's very pleasant," said Anna-Rose. "It's very pleasant to go and discover America. All for ourselves."

It was Anna-Rosa who suggested their being Christopher and Columbus. She was the elder by twenty minutes. Both had had their seventeenth birthday—and what a birthday: no cake, no candles, no kisses and wreaths and home-made poems; but then, as Anna-Felicitas pointed out, to comfort Anna-Rose who was taking it hard, you can't get blood out of an aunt—only a month before. Both were very German outside and very English inside. Both had fair hair, and the sorts of chins Germans have, and eyes the colour of the sky in August along the shores of the Baltic. Their noses were brief, and had been objected to in Germany, where, if you are a Junker's daughter, you are expected to show it in your nose. Anna-Rose had a tight little body, inclined to the round. Anna-Felicitas, in spite of being a twin, seemed to have made the most of her twenty extra minutes to grow more in; anyhow she was tall and thin, and she drooped; and having perhaps grown quicker made her eyes more dreamy, and her thoughts more slow. And both held their heads up with a great air of calm whenever anybody on the ship looked at them, as who should say serenely, "We're *thoroughly* happy, and having the time of our lives."

For worlds they wouldn't have admitted to each other that they were even aware of such a thing as being anxious or wanting to cry. Like other persons of English blood, they never were so cheerful nor pretended to be so much amused as when they were right down on the very bottom of their luck. Like other persons of German blood, they had the squashiest corners deep in their hearts, where they secretly clung to cakes and Christmas trees, and fought a tendency to celebrate every possible anniversary, both dead and alive.

The gulls, circling white against the gloomy sky over the rubbish that floated on the Mersey, made them feel extraordinarily forlorn. Empty boxes, bits of straw, orange-peel, a variety of dismal dirtiness lay about on the sullen water; England was slipping away, England, their mother's country, the country of their dreams ever since they could remember—and the *St. Luke* with a loud screech had suddenly stopped.

Neither of them could help jumping a little at that and getting an inch closer together beneath the rug. Surely it wasn't a submarine already?

"We're Christopher and Columbus," said Anna-Rose quickly, changing as it were the unspoken conversation.

As the eldest she had a great sense of her responsibility toward her twin, and considered it one of her first duties to cheer and encourage her. Their mother had always cheered and encouraged them, and hadn't seemed to mind anything, however awful it was, that happened to her,—such as, for instance, when the war began and they three, their father having died some years before, left their home up by the Baltic, just as there was the most heavenly weather going on, and the garden was a dream, and the blue Chinchilla cat had produced four perfect kittens that very day,—all of whom had to be left to what Anna-Felicitas, whose thoughts if slow were picturesque once she had got them, called the tender mercies of a savage and licentious soldiery,—and came by slow and difficult stages to England; or such as when their mother began catching cold and didn't seem at last ever able to leave off catching cold, and though she tried to pretend she didn't mind colds and that they didn't matter, it was plain that these colds did at last matter very much, for between them they killed her.

Their mother had always been cheerful and full of hope. Now that she was dead, it was clearly Anna-Rose's duty, as the next eldest in the family, to carry on the tradition and discountenance too much drooping in Anna-Felicitas. Anna-Felicitas was staring much too thoughtfully at the deepening gloom of the late afternoon sky and the rubbish brooding on the face of the waters, and she had jumped rather excessively when the *St. Luke* stopped so suddenly, just as if it were putting on the brake hard, and emitted that agonized whistle.

"We're Christopher and Columbus," said Anna-Rose quickly, "and we're going to discover America."

"Very well," said Anna-Felicitas. "I'll be Christopher."

"No. I'll be Christopher," said Anna-Rose.

"Very well," said Anna-Felicitas, who was the most amiable, acquiescent person in the world. "Then I suppose I'll have to be Columbus. But I think Christopher sounds prettier."

Both rolled their r's incurably. It was evidently in their blood, for nothing, no amount of teaching and admonishment, could get them out of it. Before they were able to talk at all, in those happy days when parents make astounding assertions to other parents about the intelligence and certain future brilliancy of their offspring, and the other parents, however much they may pity such self-deception, can't contradict, because after all it just possibly may be so, the most foolish people occasionally producing geniuses,—in those happy days of undisturbed bright castle-building, the mother, who was English, of the two derelicts now huddled on the dank deck of the *St. Luke*, said to the father, who was German, "At any rate these two blessed little bundles of deliciousness"—she had one on each arm and was tickling their noses alternately with her eyelashes, and they were screaming for joy—"won't have to learn either German or English. They'll just *know* them."

"Perhaps," said the father, who was a cautious man.

"They're born bi-lingual," said the mother; and the twins wheezed and choked with laughter, for she was tickling them beneath their chins, softly fluttering her eyelashes along the creases of fat she thought so adorable.

"Perhaps," said the father.

"It gives them a tremendous start," said the mother; and the twins squirmed in a dreadful ecstasy, for she had now got to their ears.

"Perhaps," said the father.

But what happened was that they didn't speak either language. Not, that is, as a native should. Their German bristled with mistakes. They spoke it with a foreign accent. It was copious, but incorrect. Almost the last thing their father, an accurate man, said to them as he lay dying, had to do with a misplaced dative. And when they talked English it rolled about uncontrollably on its r's, and had a great many long words in it got from Milton, and Dr. Johnson, and people like that, whom their mother had particularly loved, but as they talked far more to their mother than to their father, who was a man of much briefness in words though not in temper, they were better on the whole at English than German.

Their mother, who loved England more the longer she lived away from it,—"*As one does; and the same principle,*" Anna-Rose explained to Anna-Felicitas when they had lived some time with their aunt and uncle, "*applies to relations, aunts' husbands, and the clergy,*"—never tired of telling her children about it, and its poetry, and its spirit, and the greatness and glory of its points of view. They drank it all in and believed every word of it, for so did their mother; and as they grew up they flung themselves on all the English books they could lay hands upon, and they read with their mother and learned by heart most of the obviously beautiful things; and because she glowed with enthusiasm they glowed too—Anna-Rose in a flare and a flash, Anna-Felicitas slow and steadily. They adored their mother. Whatever she loved they loved blindly. It was a pity

she died. She died soon after the war began. They had been so happy, so *dreadfully* happy....

"You can't be Christopher," said Anna-Rose, giving herself a shake, for here she was thinking of her mother, and it didn't do to think of one's mother, she found; at least, not when one is off to a new life and everything is all promise because it isn't anything else, and not if one's mother happened to have been so—well, so fearfully sweet. "You can't be Christopher, because, you see, I'm the eldest."

Anna-Felicitas didn't see what being the eldest had to do with it, but she only said, "Very well," in her soft voice, and expressed a hope that Anna-Rose would see her way not to call her Col for short. "I'm afraid you will, though," she added, "and then I shall feel so like Onkel Nicolas."

This was their German uncle, known during his life-time, which had abruptly left off when the twins were ten, as Onkel Col; a very ancient person, older by far even than their father, who had seemed so very old. But Onkel Col had been older than anybody at all, except the pictures of the *liebe Gott* in Blake's illustrations to the Book of Job. He came to a bad end. Neither their father nor their mother told them anything except that Onkel Col was dead; and their father put a black band round the left sleeve of his tweed country suit and was more good-tempered than ever, and their mother, when they questioned her, just said that poor Onkel Col had gone to heaven, and that in future they would speak of him as Onkel Nicolas, because it was more respectful.

"But why does mummy call him poor, when he's gone to heaven?" Anna-Felicitas asked Anna-Rose privately, in the recesses of the garden.

"First of all," said Anna-Rose, who, being the eldest, as she so often explained to her sister, naturally knew more about everything, "because the angels won't like him. Nobody *could* like Onkel Col. Even if they're angels. And though they're obliged to have him there because he was such a very good man, they won't talk to him much or notice him much when God isn't looking. And second of all, because you *are* poor when you get to heaven. Everybody is poor in heaven. Nobody takes their things with them, and all Onkel Col's money is still on earth. He couldn't even take his clothes with him."

"Then is he quite—did Onkel Col go there quite—"

Anna-Felicitas stopped. The word seemed too awful in connection with Onkel Col, that terrifying old gentleman who had roared at them from the folds of so many wonderful wadded garments whenever they were led in, trembling, to see him, for he had gout and was very terrible; and it seemed particularly awful when one thought of Onkel Col going to heaven, which was surely of all places the most *endimanché*.

"Of course," nodded Anna-Rose; but even she dropped her voice a little. She peeped about among the bushes a moment, then put her mouth close to Anna-Felicitas's ear, and whispered, "Stark."

They stared at one another for a space with awe and horror in their eyes.

"You see," then went on Anna-Rose rather quickly, hurrying away from the awful vision, "one knows one doesn't have clothes in heaven because they don't have the moth there. It says so in the Bible. And you can't have the moth without having anything for it to go into."

"Then they don't have to have naphthalin either," said Anna-Felicitas, "and don't all have to smell horrid in the autumn when they take their furs out."

"No. And thieves don't break in and steal either in heaven," continued Anna-Rose, "and the reason why is that there *isn't* anything to steal."

"There's angels," suggested Anna-Felicitas after a pause, for she didn't like to think there was nothing really valuable in heaven.

"Oh, nobody ever steals *them*," said Anna-Rose.

Anna-Felicitas's slow thoughts revolved round this new uncomfortable view of heaven. It seemed, if Anna-Rose were right, and she always was right for she said so herself, that heaven couldn't be such a safe place after all, nor such a kind place. Thieves could break in and steal if they wanted to. She had a proper horror of thieves. She was sure the night would certainly come when they would break into her father's *Schloss*, or, as her English nurse called it, her dear Papa's slosh; and she was worried that poor Onkel Col should be being snubbed up there, and without anything to put on, which would make being snubbed so much worse, for clothes did somehow comfort one.

She took her worries to the nursemaid, and choosing a moment when she knew Anna-Rose wished to be unnoticed, it being her hour for inconspicuously eating unripe apples at the bottom of the orchard, an exercise Anna-Felicitas only didn't indulge in because she had learned through affliction that her inside, fond and proud of it as she was, was yet not of that superior and blessed kind that suffers green apples gladly—she sought out the nursemaid, whose name, too, confusingly, was Anna, and led the conversation up to heaven and the possible conditions prevailing in it by asking her to tell her, in strict confidence and as woman to woman, what she thought Onkel Col exactly looked like at that moment.

"Unrecognizable," said the nursemaid promptly.

"Unrecognizable?" echoed Anna-Felicitas.

And the nursemaid, after glancing over her shoulder to see if the governess were nowhere in sight, told Anna-Felicitas the true story of Onkel Col's end: which is so bad that it isn't fit to be put in any book except one with an appendix.

A stewardess passed just as Anna-Felicitas was asking Anna-Rose not to remind her of these grim portions of the past by calling her Col, a stewardess in such a very clean white cap that she looked both reliable and benevolent, while secretly she was neither.

"Can you please tell us why we're stopping?" Anna-Rose inquired of her politely, leaning forward to catch her attention as she hurried by.

The stewardess allowed her roving eye to alight for a moment on the two objects beneath the rug. Their chairs were close together, and the rug covered them both up to their chins. Over the top of it their heads appeared, exactly alike as far as she could see in the dusk; round heads, each with a blue knitted cap pulled well over its ears, and round eyes staring at her with what anybody except the stewardess would have recognized as a passionate desire for some sort of reassurance. They might have been seven instead of seventeen for all the stewardess could tell. They looked younger than anything she had yet seen sitting alone on a deck and asking questions. But she was an exasperated widow, who had never had children and wasn't to be touched by anything except a tip, besides despising, because she was herself a second-class stewardess, all second-class passengers,— "As one does," Anna-Rose explained later on to Anna-Felicitas, "and the same principle applies to Jews." So she said with an acidity completely at variance with the promise of her cap, "Ask the Captain," and disappeared.

The twins looked at each other. They knew very well that captains on ships were mighty beings who were not asked questions.

"She's trifling with us," murmured Anna-Felicitas.

"Yes," Anna-Rose was obliged to admit, though the thought was repugnant to her that they should look like people a stewardess would dare trifle with.

"Perhaps she thinks we're younger than we are," she said after a silence.

"Yes. She couldn't see how long our dresses are, because of the rug."

"No. And it's only that end of us that really shows we're grown up."

"Yes. She ought to have seen us six months ago."

Indeed she ought. Even the stewardess would have been surprised at the activities and complete appearance of the two pupæ now rolled motionless in the rug. For, six months ago, they had both been probationers in a children's hospital in Worcestershire, arrayed, even as the stewardess, in spotless caps, hurrying hither and thither with trays of food, sweeping and washing up, learning to make beds in a given time, and be deft, and quick, and never tired, and always punctual.

This place had been got them by the efforts and influence of their Aunt Alice, that aunt who had given them the rug on their departure and who had omitted to celebrate their

birthday. She was an amiable aunt, but she didn't understand about birthdays. It was the first one they had had since they were complete orphans, and so they were rather sensitive about it. But they hadn't cried, because since their mother's death they had done with crying. What could there ever again be in the world bad enough to cry about after that? And besides, just before she dropped away from them into the unconsciousness out of which she never came back, but instead just dropped a little further into death, she had opened her eyes unexpectedly and caught them sitting together in a row by her bed, two images of agony, with tears rolling down their swollen faces and their noses in a hopeless state, and after looking at them a moment as if she had slowly come up from some vast depth and distance and were gradually recognizing them, she had whispered with a flicker of the old encouraging smile that had comforted every hurt and bruise they had ever had, "*Don't cry ... little darlings, don't cry....*"

But on that first birthday after her death they had got more and more solemn as time passed, and breakfast was cleared away, and there were no sounds, prick up their ears as they might, of subdued preparations in the next room, no stealthy going up and down stairs to fetch the presents, and at last no hope at all of the final glorious flinging open of the door and the vision inside of two cakes all glittering with candles, each on a table covered with flowers and all the things one has most wanted.

Their aunt didn't know. How should she? England was a great and beloved country, but it didn't have proper birthdays.

"Every country has one drawback," Anna-Rose explained to Anna-Felicitas when the morning was finally over, in case she should by any chance be thinking badly of the dear country that had produced their mother as well as Shakespeare, "and not knowing about birthdays is England's."

"There's Uncle Arthur," said Anna-Felicitas, whose honest mind groped continually after accuracy.

"Yes," Anna-Rose admitted after a pause. "Yes. There's Uncle Arthur."

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