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Opening extract from

The Family from One End Street

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CHAPTER ONE

The Christenings

MRS RUGGLES was a Washerwoman and her husband was a Dustman. 'Very suitable too,' she would say, though whether this referred to Mr Ruggles himself, or the fact that they both, so to speak, cleaned up after other people, it was hard to decide.

Mr Ruggles's name was Josiah, and he was called Jo for short by his friends. His wife had a variety of names for him – 'Here – Jo', 'Hi – you!', 'Dad', 'Old Man', and, when she was in a *particularly* good temper and sometimes on Sunday afternoons, 'Dearie'.

Mrs Ruggles's name was Rosie and no one, except her children, ever thought of calling her anything else.

There were a great many Ruggles children – boys and girls, and a baby that was really a boy but didn't count either way yet.

The neighbours pitied Jo and Rosie for having such a large family, and called it 'Victorian'; but the Dustman and his wife were proud of their numerous girls and boys, all-growing-up-fine-and-strong-one-behind-the-other-like-steps-in-a-ladder, and-able-to-wear-each-others-clothes-right-down-to-the-baby, so that really it was only two sets, girl and boy, summer and winter, Mrs Ruggles had to buy, except *Boots*.

A great deal was heard about boots in the Ruggles household. They were always wearing out and being taken to the little shop round the corner to be 'soled and heeled', and 'tipped' with bits of iron or rubber in order to try and make them last a little longer. Nearly every

week one of the little Ruggles could be seen running with a boot in either hand to the shop, or returning with a bulky parcel badly wrapped in old brown paper.

The Ruggles family lived in a small town – that is to say, there were three cinemas and Woolworth's five minutes' walk from their door, but no green fields without a sign of a house and just a hedge and trees all round, unless they walked for half an hour. The Town was called Otwell, except on the Railway Station and in advertisements where it was called 'Otwell-on-the-Ouse'. This was misleading, as many a visitor, lured from London in the summer by posters of the Ouse with Otwell and its famous Castle rising from the banks, had discovered. For, in reality, the Ouse, a muddy sort of stream, flowed through the fields to the sea, six miles off, some way outside the Town; there was one place where it curved in, as if out of curiosity to see what the Town was like, and that was just beyond

the station, so that it was really only the Railway Bridge and signal box that could truthfully be said to be 'on the Ouse', and the Railway Company made the most of this.

The Ruggles lived at No. 1 One End Street, which was in the middle part of the Town, nearest Woolworth's and the cinemas and farthest from the fields. From Monday till Friday morning the house, which was very old and very small, was full of steam and the smell of damp and drying clothes, but on Friday afternoon and Saturday it got aired a bit, and by Sunday was as clean and tidy as any other in the Town. Outside hung a blue board on which was painted in large white letters, 'The Ideal Laundry. Careful Hand Work', and underneath, in smaller letters, the mysterious words 'Bag-wash'.

There was a small yard at the back where the washing was hung to dry on fine days, and where Mr Ruggles did a little landscape and kitchen gardening in his spare time, kept three



Running with a boot in either hand

hens in an old soap-box, had dreams of a Pig, and at times, being a Dustman, nightmares of a Sanitary Inspector.

Lily Rose was the eldest of the Ruggles family. She was twelve and a half – going on thirteen, and already in the top class but one at school, and handy with the mangle at home. Her great trial in life was her name, for she was a red-haired stoutish child and bore no resemblance

to a lily of any kind or a rose either unless it were a cabbage one, but, as she sometimes sighed, she supposed it might have been worse. It might indeed. It nearly *was*!

One day, before they were married, Rosie and Jo went on An-Excursion-to-London. Amongst other places they visited the Tate Gallery where they saw a picture – 'Lovely', to Rosie's way of thinking, and 'That Real', though at the same time confusing. It was called 'Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,' and it showed two children among the flowers at dusk engaged in hanging up Japanese lanterns. Rosie was undecided whether the title referred to the flowers or the children; each was spelt with a capital letter, but the actual flowers were rather vague whereas the children were solid enough; but then, why was Lily there twice over and *could* one call a child Carnation? Jo, on being asked, said he didn't rightly know, and for his part was puzzled over the artist's name in the corner – Sargent –

and couldn't understand how soldiers got time for that sort of thing though he'd always heard the army were an easy job. 'Spelt it wrong, too,' said Rosie looking more closely. 'It's one of them catch-words. I know. My uncle was in the Police – would have been sergeant himself if he hadn't been caught setting rabbit wires one night – collecting skins to make his wife a nice fur coat, he were – eighty-three they found in the back kitchen. Too kind a man he was – that were *his* trouble.'

Jo, who had heard this story before, said, well it didn't matter anyway, and he'd like to see some more cheerful kind of pictures, so they went into another room and enjoyed battle scenes and shipwrecks; Jo's boots, which had been newly 'tipped', making a great noise on the beautiful shiny floor and causing a lot of annoyed glances from the middle-aged ladies and haughty-looking young artists who seemed to be up for the Excursion too. It was only when



One End Street

they were thoroughly tired after a finish-up at Madame Tussaud's and the Zoo and a ride on some swing-boats at a fun fair, and were sitting over fish-and-chips and cocoa in a tea shop, that Rosie mentioned the picture again.

'Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,' she murmured between a mouthful of fish-and-chips and rather hot cocoa.

'What is it, Rosie, swallowed a bone?' asked Mr Ruggles sympathetically.

'Bone – not likely – they're filleted – it's that picture. Jo, when we're married, I'd like to call our first baby Carnation Lily Rose; it would be after me, and we could choose Carnation or Lily for first.'

'And what if it's a boy?' asked Jo.

'It won't be,' said Rosie firmly.

It was not; but at the church door Jo protested so strongly against Carnation as a name for his first-born, and the Vicar said so sternly, 'Come, come; I have three other babies to christen and my wife has friends to tea, you *must* make up your minds,' that Rosie gave way and the screaming red-haired baby was christened, without further argument, simple Lily Rose.

The next baby was a girl too, and Jo said it was his turn to choose a name this time, and she should be called plain Kate after his dear mother.

'Plain *she* may have been,' retorted Rosie, 'but my baby's a beauty; aren't you, lovely?'



A thin freckled child with spindly legs and wispy hair

But alas! Kate justified her name, and plain she grew up, a thin freckled child with spindly legs and wispy hair – a startling contrast to the stout Lily Rose.

Twin boys came next, and Mr Ruggles, who had called at the Vicarage to ask for kind assistance in clothing his sons, only *one* having been expected, spent the Sunday after their arrival in church. This was partly in order to

be out of the way of the fuss at home which the twins' arrival had caused, and partly as a kind of compliment to the Vicar's wife who had been so obliging in the matter of extra baby clothes. For Mr Ruggles was not an ardent churchgoer, and it had crossed his mind on the Vicarage doorstep that his last attendance had been at the Harvest Festival held several months previously.



– a startling contrast to the stout Lily Rose

Although he knelt, stood and sat down with the congregation, Mr Ruggles found it hard to keep his attention on the service, for his mind was busy with many things. At the present moment the Twins filled most of it, but one corner, his gardening corner, was very much occupied with the progress of his spring vegetables and how it was that Mr Hook at No. 2 One End Street was so much further on with his leeks and carrots. Then there was the problem of whether one or two more hens could be squeezed into the soap-box. If the family was going to increase at the present rate, thought Mr Ruggles, the more he could produce in the food line at home the better. And then, always, of course, there was the Question of the Pig. Here Jo gave himself up to a few moments' happy dreaming . . . Surely, in that corner between the hen-box and the little tool-shed, there was room enough for a small sty; he could take in a bit of the flower border and Rosie could have her clothes line a

few inches shorter – come to that, he might even pull down the tool-shed altogether and keep his tools in the kitchen, though no doubt Rosie would object. Anyway, with twins in the house, it was high time the Pig Question was really considered seriously. There was a fleeting vision of the Sanitary Inspector, but it was of the briefest, and as the congregation sat down for the Second Lesson, hens, vegetables and twins once more filled Mr Ruggles's mind.

'Now the names of the twelve apostles are these,' read the Vicar.

Jo pricked up his ears. Names. There was another problem. Rosie had been very quiet about the names this time. He'd said nothing himself, but he was sure she'd something up her sleeve – he believed she'd never quite forgiven him over that Carnation business and Kate. It looked as if he ought to let her have some say in the matter this time, but, really, he drew the line at fancy and flowery names for boys, and they *would* be fancy or

flowery or both if Rosie had a hand in it he was sure.

'Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother,' read the Vicar, 'James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew . . .'

'Seems to go in pairs like,' said Jo to himself. It seemed encouraging. 'Better pick two of these and get it over,' he thought, but the Vicar was reading on, and the next thing Jo caught was about a workman being worthy of his meat and that, too, he felt, was singularly appropriate and hoped his Sunday dinner would be a good one! Then, as if an idea had suddenly struck him, he seized a prayer book from the ledge in front of him, and, after wetting his finger and rustling many pages, found the place he wanted. He pulled a stub of pencil from his pocket, held it poised over the list of the apostles, shut his eyes and brought it down 'plop!' James and John. Jo breathed a sigh of relief – he'd been afraid of Philip and

Bartholomew – especially Bartholomew. 'That decides it,' he muttered, and Mrs Chips, the grocer's wife, sitting resplendent in sapphire blue velvet in the farthest corner of the pew so that no one by any possible chance should think they were friends (so great is the gulf between grocery and scavenging), turned a stern and reproving eye on him. But Mr Ruggles was oblivious; a problem was solved, and his mind made up for him – a labour-saving device he much appreciated. The Twins' names were settled, and he would slip round to the vestry immediately after the service and arrange for the christening.

When he got home with the good news Rosie was annoyed. 'Decided, have you? Well, I've decided too; Roland and Nigel – that's what they're going to be. James and John indeed!'

'*Roland and Nigel* – what*ever*!' exclaimed Mr Ruggles. 'Not if I know it – a dustman's sons!'

'And what's wrong with dustmen?' retorted Rosie – 'where'd people be in *this* Town, I'd like to know, if it wasn't for you – and me too for that matter – washing for them and cleaning up after them – a fine state they'd be in!'

'Maybe,' said Jo, 'but I won't have my sons called Roland and Nigel, and besides, I've just told you, I've given the names to the Vicar.'

'Well, you can go and tell him you've changed your mind, that's all, and now for goodness' sake go and let the hens out – you forgot 'em this morning.'

But once again Jo had his way. Rosie was tied with two babies at once to look after – not to mention Lily Rose and Kate, and after all . . . Roland and Nigel . . . perhaps . . . the other kids might laugh at them; she was always glad (though secretly) they'd knocked the Carnation off Lily Rose. She got ragged as it was, now she'd begun to go to school . . .

The Twins were christened James and John.

For two years there were no further additions to the Ruggles family, and then another boy appeared. 'There'll be no difficulty about this one,' said Jo. 'He'll be called after me.' He was, but there was a difficulty all the same. Two 'Jo's' in one house caused so much confusion that Mr Ruggles had to become 'Old Jo', and sometimes, when he was tired, he said he felt it.

Another two years went by before the next baby came, and this time it was a girl. 'Good thing too,' said Mrs Ruggles, 'I'm tired of boys. And it's my turn to choose a name,' she continued, looking hard at Old Jo as he sat smoking his after-tea pipe. 'Yes, it's my turn, and I'm going to have my way this time. "Margaret Rosie" she's going to be, after me and the little princess mixed, and if that's too grand for a dustman's child – well, you can always call her Peggy – I shan't object.' She had her way, although Mr Ruggles pointed out she already had one child called after her,

and the baby was christened Margaret Rosie and very shortly became Peggy, and before she was two years old, Peg. It seemed, too, she was to remain the youngest of the Ruggles, and then, although Mrs Ruggles was tired of boys, four years later another one appeared. 'And the last I hope, girl or boy,' said Rosie.

There was less arguing than usual over this baby's name, for Rosie had a bright idea and suggested it might be rather nice and a delicate compliment to call him after the Vicar who had so kindly, free of all charge, christened the first half-dozen. 'Depends on what his name *is*,' said Mr Ruggles guardedly. (He had fears of Roland or Nigel or something like them again.)

Although Mrs Ruggles was not the regular laundry woman for the Vicarage, she occasionally did odd work to 'oblige' Mrs Theobald, the Vicar's wife; and one evening when she was returning some of her obliging

work she decided to ask the Vicar if he would mind if she called her last baby after him.

The Reverend Theobald said he would be delighted, but his name was James, and surely, if he was not mistaken, had not that already been bestowed on one of the twins – would William, his second name, do?

Mrs Ruggles said, oh yes, it would do very well indeed, thank you, and was just going to add that her husband couldn't say there was anything wrong with *that* for a dustman's son, when it occurred to her that perhaps it wouldn't be very tactful and . . . what was he saying . . . A great expense so many children . . . and here was a pound note . . . a christening present for William.

Mrs Ruggles almost ran back to No. 1 One End Street with the good news.

'Well?' said her husband as he met her at the door and took her empty laundry basket, 'well, what have you done about it? His name's James – I've just seen it in the Parish

Magazine – but there was a W too,' he added hopefully.

'A "flowery" name,' cried Rosie, rushing across to the cradle, and lifting the sleeping baby in her arms and kissing him so that he woke and howled dismally. '*Another* "flowery" name!'

'*What*?' cried Jo. 'Come off it; I won't have no Carnations and such like in my family – and a boy too!'

'He's William!' shouted Rosie, 'Sweet William, and he is sweet too, and he's give me a pound note for William for a christening present!'

When, at last, Mr Ruggles disentangled the 'he's' and the 'Williams', he breathed a sigh of relief.

So the baby was William, though not always sweet; and he was the last.