

## “Maggie Ringtinton and Charles Cheerfle”

Somewhere just beyond the little town of Piculiar, situated near the river Vere, lived Mr and Mrs Ringtinton with their daughter, Maggie. Their house was located on the border between Winter and Autumn. This didn't seem peculiar to Maggie at all. After all, everyone's house had to be located on some border or other, and theirs, it turned out, was between Winter and Autumn, which, she thought, sounded rather lovely, actually.

What *was* peculiar, however, was that Maggie had never been able to understand what was quite so wintry or autumny about the front or back of her house. There just didn't seem to be much difference between the seemingly infinite tracts of land lying before her house or the slightly mountainous landscape behind her house. Nothing particularly autumny or wintry about it, really...

It was illogical; a wintry day was when it snowed, if the following day was very cloudy but without rain then that was obviously a springy day, another day could be very sunny and very hot, hence a summery day and a rainy day was autumny. But, surely, these qualities belonged to a certain time, not to a certain place? Maggie, however, had decided not to worry about it anymore; just like she didn't worry about the M standing in front of the N in the alphabet, which also went against logic.

Today happened to be a wintry day and though Maggie was very much in love with snow, she was not outside today. Instead, she was sitting in her room, staring out of her window, disgruntled with her parents for having a party *today*, inviting loads of people (which was perfectly horrible enough) who consequently walked on, and thus ruined, all her precious, perfect snow.

But Maggie wasn't unhappy, she never was. She could lie in the snow all day, tomorrow, and she had made arrangements, too. Arrangements which involved only one person (the perfect amount of person anyone could ever have need for) and, more importantly, a person she actually wanted to spend time with and who, she thought, was original in everything he said and did, and who never “jumped on the band-wagon”, contrary to those people outside who talked about nothing, cared about nothing and did nothing, except ruin her snow.

“I'm quite happy with my decision of inviting someone!” she said, knowing how very odd her uttering this was.

Maggie liked being alone, she was never lonely and she immensely enjoyed her own company. No one was ever mean, unpleasant or horrible, no one ever disagreed with her and she could do whatever she liked without having to take anyone else's wishes into consideration, which was delightful.

Maggie was a very considerate person, you see; she was never impolite, thinking it one of life's weaknesses she would never take part in, but this also meant that she was sometimes (rightfully) disappointed with people who were not considerate. This aggravated her beyond anything – even *more* (and this was saying something) than when people pronounced the word “romantic” without the “t” which was just completely and utterly wrong.

Oh, yes, Maggie did not like crowds; the mediocrity of it all frightened her like nothing else did. Because (but this wasn't the only reason; Maggie had lots of reasons, all very important and all very true) a crowd meant loads of people and loads of people engendered generalisations and generalisations were another of life's weaknesses, hence to be avoided.

But Maggie wasn't unhappy, being a very optimistic person she never dwelled on the horrible things and more often than not she simply couldn't see any drawbacks; now, for instance, she could not see anything faintly unpleasant about this situation. Yes, her beautiful snow was being trodden on, yes, she was in the vicinity of a crowd and yes, she did not like crowds *but* she was excused. Her perfect parents hadn't forced her to attend the party and she felt very unencumbered by it all.

Sitting in front of her window and waiting for Charles Cheerfle was becoming slightly boring, so Maggie got up and put on some music. Singing, she took out her pocket watch, which was quite extraordinary because Maggie didn't have pockets; normally Miranda kept her watch but today Maggie had had to take it because Miranda really wanted to sleep without being bothered and Maggie couldn't possibly say no to her (nor did she want to).

He should be here any minute now. It was now twenty past two and they'd arranged to meet at twenty-two past two. But what with the river being slightly frozen because of the snow of the previous day and night there was a chance he might not be here on time... Oh, this was no good. Maggie started pacing her room. Still singing. Always singing. Obviously.

After five minutes and, also, after pacing her very spacious room once, Maggie went and looked for Miranda. As usual, she was lying on her bed, asleep but because of the vastness of her room and Maggie's bed being as lengthy as one wall, it took a while before she saw Miranda. She lay down and used her cat as a pillow. Cats were perfect pillows. Though Miranda was not bothered by Maggie's head lying on top of her (which was good because Miranda had asked not to be bothered), Maggie still stood up and started dancing a bit instead, singing at the top of her voice.

How nice of Maggie to sing Miranda a lullaby, which Maggie reasoned her beautiful kitty deserved, seeing as she really did use Miranda quite a lot as pillow and with her heavy head –it could not possibly be light, Maggie was extremely smart, of course her brain had to weigh quite a lot... logic, after all...

She went over to the mirror. Maggie had got very dressed up for this occasion, but then again, Maggie dressed up every day... Still, she'd carefully chosen her outfit and she was very pleased with it. Five petticoats (to create the perfect amount of volume), a yellow dress, embellished with gold shells, tights (one leg white, other leg yellow) and her yellow pair of shoes. Maggie had set her in elaborate yet elegant curls and had put loads of gold shells in there, too, which all, miraculously, stayed into place, though she didn't mind it if a few shells were to fall out; she rather liked the idea of leaving a trail of golden shells behind her...

The bell rang. She opened the door and there stood Charles, dressed in a beautiful crimson overcoat, doffing his hat and wearing what she could only assume was a smile. Maggie beamed at him and Charles looked momentarily frightened. "Hello, thank you for inv-" began Charles.

"You really are absolutely beautiful, aren't you?" said Maggie, cutting across; she took his hand and led him into the house.

"Easy getting here?" she asked.

"Easy enough," said Charles, feeling annoyed because she was still towing him through her hallway. He tried to pull free but she had an incredibly firm grip. "Could you possibly let me go, please," he said grumpily.

"Oh, sorry," she said, horrified.

"It's okay," he said, making it very clear he didn't think it was okay.

"Oh," said Maggie, stopping. She felt very nervous all of a sudden. "I thought we could go to my room," she said quietly, constantly staring at him.

"Great," he said flatly. He wished she'd stop staring, it was very unnerving. He also wished he wasn't here.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house or something?" said Maggie, thinking his glasses were beautiful. Maggie wished she needed glasses. Glasses were so perfect. *Spectacles*.

"Yes, I would," said Charles, sounding rather enthusiastic for the first time. He liked seeing other people's houses: Charles was very curious and though he occasionally liked being curious when he shouldn't be, it was also nice to have permission every now and then.

Maggie showed him the house, briefly giving an explanation in each: what she liked about it, what she usually did when spending time in this particular room, which songs she thought suited the room, etc. Charles thought her quite strange and mostly ignored her while taking it all in. After having shown the ground floor, Maggie headed upstairs to her room with Charles following her.

"Where do you live?" said Maggie, reaching the landing and walking up the long hallway (her room was at the end, the south most part of the house).

"Between Mesmerising and Loud," he said.

"Oh, how nice. It sounds wonderful," said Maggie. "Is it far from here?"

"Quite far."

"We're here," she announced, opening a door.

Charles entered and immediately thought this room did not fit the house. All other rooms had been filled with stuff, cluttered even; this one, however, looked oddly bare. The room was enormous and yet there was only one bed (which, admittedly, covered one wall) and one chintz chair, in front of the window. He also noticed hundreds of gold shells scattered around the room.

Maggie fluttered in after him and closed the door. The music which had been playing seemed to become a bit louder.

"Please sit down," she said, smiling, pointing to the middle of the room.

Baffled, Charles walked a bit towards where Maggie had been pointing, then he sat down on the floor, feeling very foolish.

"Not on the floor, Silly." She chuckled. "You don't –"

"Don't call me silly," he said, angry.

Taken aback, she said, "I won't. I'm sorry, I really am. You can sit here," she added, cautiously, stepping past him and lifting up a piece of the floor to reveal a patch of grass.

"I thought we could picnic." She clapped her hands and beamed.

"I've already eaten, thanks," he said, getting up and sitting down again on her weird grass. He took off his overcoat, threw it towards the door.

He looked simply dashing in his green waistcoat, his olive shirt and brown trousers.

“This isn’t normal food,” she said, appearing beside him, carrying three yellow packages. She sat down before him and opened them. “It’s food for giants!” she cried, very pleased with herself.

“Giants?” said Charles, looking slightly less gloomy than he had done.

“We’re giants!” cried Maggie happily, clapping her hands again. “I’ve made miniature pies and tarts and biscuits,” she said happily, laying them all out on the grass because, apparently, plates were beneath giants. “Here’s a napkin,” she said, handing him something miniscule.

“Do you want something to drink?” She handed him an average sized glass.

“Why isn’t this tiny?” he said. Maggie filled his glass with something pink. It did not look appetising.

“Because giants use their own glasses,” she answered. “We might steal ordinary people’s food and napkins but stealing their glasses would be quite outrageous, don’t you think? Not to mention incredibly rude. And it would take ages to drink properly, too,” she added, thoughtfully.

Charles laughed but stopped quickly.

“Go ahead, eat.”

Charles took a tart and it really looked like a normal tart except that it was incredibly small. It wasn’t very hard to imagine he was a giant. While they were eating Maggie opened her mouth several times (luckily after swallowing her food) as if she was about to say something but then she closed it again and didn’t say anything.

Maggie suddenly got up and put the music a bit louder. Then she started to dance and sing loudly. Seeing Maggie sing was one of the most peculiar things he had ever witnessed. She didn’t sing badly, not at all, Charles had just never seen anyone so... *absorbed* in a song. It almost made him laugh, laugh wildly even; but Charles didn’t want to laugh and Maggie was not going to make him. It also occurred to him, when Maggie had started singing a second song, again completely unaware of anything, it seemed, that she might be singing to impress him or to boast about her beautiful voice; but he quickly forgot about this because he was certain this was not the case. Eating and listening, he wondered whether he’d ever be able to sing like she did and forget everything... The second song ended, a third one started; it sounded vaguely familiar.

“Why aren’t you singing?” she said, looking at him inquiringly.

“I don’t sing,” he answered, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Maggie sternly, “if you can talk, you can sing.”

He rolled his eyes again. “I mean I can’t sing well.”

“Does that matter? No,” said Maggie pointedly. “Why should that stop you? My brother can’t sing beautifully if his life depended on it but he sings every day,” she beamed.

“You have a brother?”

“Yes, I do. But we’ve temporarily lost him.” And she started to sing and dance again. Charles didn’t understand her and wanted to ask what she meant, *but* he was also extremely relieved she’d stopped talking so he decided he’d find out another time or perhaps never; he doubted whether he’d ever accept another invitation of hers.

“Charles?” He hadn’t even noticed that the music had stopped.

“Yes?”

“Are you enjoying yourself or would you rather do something else? Perhaps read a book?” It seemed Maggie was feeling rather self-conscious... Weird.

He hesitated. “Reading would actually be really nice.”

“Miranda,” said Maggie, addressing her cat. “Would you like to go and get Charles’ book? It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

Miranda blinked lazily, got up, stretching, and walked towards a hidden door, which she pushed open with her two front paws.

“Love you!” Maggie shouted after her.

Charles had a hard time grasping certain things. Eventually he asked, “‘Charles’ book?”

“The book you were reading befo- the book you’re currently reading,” she said quickly. “And you have excellent taste, by the way.”

She walked past him, towards a “hidden” bookcase. Charles started; he hadn’t even noticed the bookcase; the bookcase and all its books were covered in the same pattern as the wallpaper behind it. Now that he looked at it, he wondered how he could’ve missed it before. Maggie took a big, square-ish book and slid off the patterned paper around it.

“I’m reading this book,” she said, handing it to him. She jumped up and down, pranced a bit and then turned around in circles.

“Don’t crack the spine please,” she said, all of a sudden, panicked, seeing Charles about to open the book.

Charles didn’t dare open it anymore and held it carefully in his hands, trying hard not to touch it too much.

He heard Miranda mewling in the other room. Maggie headed for the room, closely followed by Charles. When he entered, Charles saw a beautiful room filled with books and felt that Maggie did not deserve this but his mother did; Mum loved books. Miranda was still mewling and looking at Charles’s book, which Maggie took before heading back to her bedroom.

“You can sit wherever you like.”

Maggie was going to lie on her bed, Charles chose to read on the grass.

They’d been reading for quite a while when Maggie asked, “Do you prefer books to be chaptered or do you prefer them chapterless?”

“Urgh... I— I can’t say I’ve ever... thought about it before... Chaptered, I guess...” he said, feeling put on the spot.

She smiled.

Charles smiled awkwardly back. This was not pleasant.

“Do you prefer chapters, or...?” said Charles, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“I don’t know,” said Maggie slowly, looking lost in thought. Her eyes became unfocused and she even stopped breathing for a bit. Then she blinked.

“I’ve no idea... I don’t mind chapters,” she decided. “As long as I can read I’m happy,” she beamed. “And do you ever wonder whether someone on this globe is, at this exact moment, reading the same book or even the same page you are...?”

Interesting though the questions were, Charles really wanted to be left alone to read without interruptions.

“No,” he said curtly.

After a few hours, Maggie stood up and left the room to get more giant food. She was rather enjoying herself today, more than she'd expected. Charles was a bit sad but that was to be expected, wasn't it? Perhaps she should talk to him about it? But that'd be weird, wouldn't it? And she really didn't know what to say... But not saying anything would be rude...

Her mind made up, she entered her room; Charles didn't even look up.

"I brought more food!"

"Great," he said, laying aside his book. Maggie joined him on the grass. They ate and Maggie was happy to see him looking less gloomy.

"So..." Maggie hesitated. "How d'you... feel?" she said, thinking *how do you do?* would perhaps be a bit formal.

He frowned. "Great," said Charles shortly.

"If you... want to talk, you can... you know..." she said, feeling more and more like an idiot. She blushed.

"I don't want to talk about her," he said, reproachfully.

"You don't have to," she said quickly, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Especially not to you," said Charles viciously.

"That's a bit uncalled for, don't you think?" said Maggie, taken aback.

"Why?" said Charles, standing up. He took his bowler hat and put it on.

"You can't leave!" said Maggie indignantly.

"I can do whatever I like!"

"Please don't leave. We were having such a great time."

"We were?" he said, turning around, looking very unfriendly.

"Yes, we were! We ate, we sang and we read! It was wonderful!"

He glared at her. Charles didn't quite understand why he was so angry, but that didn't matter now; all he knew was that he didn't want to spend time with this clearly deranged girl who wanted to be a giant and who wore shells in her hair.

"Why did you invite me?" he demanded suddenly.

"To cheer you up," said Maggie, regretting it the moment the words had left her lips.

"I don't need to be cheered up, you mad woman," he said through gritted teeth.

"Well, I thought you did! You're unhappy! I wanted to make you happy!"

"*You* wanted to make *me* happy?" He swore loudly. "You're mad! Completely mental! I don't need to be happy now! Have you even considered HOW IMPROPER THAT WOULD BE?" He looked around for his coat.

"I never wanted to come here!" he shouted, looking quite beside himself. "Dad made me, thinking it'd be good to get out of the house!" He looked angrier.

"RUDE!" she cried, prancing with rage. Shells fell out of her hair.

"I agree! I was fine at home!"

"No, I meant it was rude for you to say you didn't want to come!"

"It's not rude, it's the truth!" he spat savagely. "Why did you even invite me? I don't think we've ever spoken before this!"

"How dare you?" she cried. "How dare you pretend we've never spoken! As if you could easily forget me! You can't be rude to me! Just because your mother was trampled to death does not mean you can be rude to me! NO!" she added, horrified at what she'd said. "No, that's not-" She wanted to apologise, she closed her hands to her mouth.

“SHUT UP!” He picked up one of the golden shells lying on the floor as if to throw it but he didn’t. “You- you- shut up!” he bellowed, even though Maggie hadn’t said anything.

Charles glared at her and started to blink a lot. Deeply ashamed, she didn’t dare say anything more; she couldn’t comfort him, she could never comfort anyone... This was not how the day was supposed to go! She’d wanted to take his mind off things, cheer him up. But now, he was crying, he was angry and this made her very uncomfortable.

“Here, have another tart,” she said, advancing towards him with her giant food.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me, I’m perfect!” She tried to smile.

“Don’t change the subject!”

“I’m not changing the subject!”

“Yes, you are! You were talking about my *trampled-to-death* mother,” he said scathingly, “that’s obviously why you invited me! Great, try to cheer me up then!”

Maggie felt slightly dizzy; she could not understand him and she could not understand this conversation, there was no logic in it.

“Now I *should* cheer you up?”

“Yes.” He crossed his arms and waited.

“Okay... Why don’t I show you the rest of my room?” she said warily, her voice quite high.

“No. You’re going to “cheer me up” whilst *not* ignoring my mother’s death.”

“I-I...” Charles just kept staring, it was very uncomfortable. “I don’t know how,” she said, blinking rapidly.

“There’s another hidden door,” she continued, hurrying towards the end of the room. “It’s my sleeping room. The entire floor’s a mattress,” she explained.

“You really can’t face reality, can you?”

“What?” said Maggie, startled. It was official; all logic had fled from the conversation.

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re a coward.” He smiled evilly.

“I’m not! And do not be mean! You cannot be mean in here. This is my room! I decide what happens in my room! Out! *Out!*”

“You never wanted to cheer me up. You don’t care ‘bout anything that does not affect you,” said Charles rather calmly.

“That is not true.”

“It is true; you want to kick me out of your room because I’m supposedly mean. You don’t like reality.”

“No, you don’t like reality! And I’m helping you forget it because maybe I was right and you should forget it! And that has nothing to do with ignoring your mother!”

“Stop talking about my mother! You cannot talk about her!”

“I won’t!”

“And I have every right to not like reality! You, however, don’t! Nothing unpleasant has ever happened to you! You want-”

“How would you know?” she screeched.

“To live in some fantasy world where horrible things don’t happen,” he said, ignoring her. Maggie didn’t understand anything, it was as if five conversations had mingled and this was the result; she could not make head or tail of it.

She gave him his overcoat and opened the door. She slammed the door and Charles stormed through the house, fumbling with the buttons on his coat, fuming.

Closing the front door behind him, Charles found himself in the middle of Maggie's parents' party. Literally in the middle; the festivities were taking place around the house. He was momentarily startled, having been completely unaware of anything besides Maggie's insanity for the last few hours.

He looked round and spotted Maggie's parents. Did they know what kind of a daughter they had raised? Sad, he thought, watching her parents dancing wildly and not at all to the music. At least there were normal people here, besides her parents, he thought, who were still dancing like mad people.

He gratefully took a drink, which was not pink, and walked around for a bit, listening to people's conversations, when all of a sudden he stopped and heard the words "Maggie" and "her brother". He tried to listen but nearby a group of people was singing, all looking very smug (obviously not singing for the fun of it like Maggie had done, but to show how great singers they were), which made it near impossible to hear the conversation but he caught the gist of it. He heard a woman saying, "- ask me, that Maggie's always been a rotten child who -" before some bloke shouted, "Dance!", ending the conversation.

Charles looked down and saw he was still holding one of Maggie's golden shells. The woman who'd called Maggie rotten was dancing not too far, Charles aimed and thought to throw the shell at her before changing his mind.

He left the party, trying not to laugh before he was out of earshot. He wondered what Maggie would say when he told her about this tomorrow.