

1902–1908

One
Clarry and Peter



More than one hundred years ago, in the time of gas lamps and candlelight, when shops had wooden counters and the streets were full of horses, a baby girl was born. Nobody was pleased about this except the baby's mother. The baby's father did not like children, not even his own, and Peter, the baby's brother, was only three years old and did not understand the need for any extra people in his world.

But the baby's mother *was* pleased. She named the baby Clarissa, after her own lost mother. '*Clear and bright,*' she whispered to her brand-new baby. 'That's what your name means: *Clear and bright.* Clarry.'

Clarry was three days old when her mother died. Many things were said about this great calamity, and some of them were regretted later, when people had calmed down and there were fewer tears and more worried frowns in the narrow stone house where the baby had so inconsiderately arrived and her mother had so inconveniently departed. For it was, as the baby's father remarked (in no one's presence, unless a

week-old baby counted), a blasted nuisance. And if it had to happen, and she had to die, the father added bitterly, then it was a pity that the baby had not also . . .

Luckily, at this point three-year-old Peter stamped into the room, and stopped the awful words that might have come next. Peter was kinder than his father. He merely gripped the bars of the baby's cot and screamed.

'Go away, go away,' he screamed at the quiet baby. 'Mumma, Mumma, Mumma, Mumma, Mumma!'

Poor Peter's voice was hoarse with shrieking; he had been protesting in this way for what seemed to him a lifetime, but he did not give up. Long after his fingers had been unpeeled one by one from the cot's bars, and he had been hauled downstairs and handed to his grandmother, he kept up his lament.

'It is all completely beyond me,' said Peter's father truthfully to his own mother, the children's grandmother, when she arrived at the house. After Clarry's birth, he took refuge in his office in town as often as possible. There, he did who-knew-what in blissful peace for as long as he could make the hours stretch. He never came home willingly.

The children's grandmother was not there willingly either. The house in Plymouth where Peter and Clarry lived was a long and inconvenient distance from her own Cornish home. Also, she already had one unrequested child living with her, her not-quite-seven-year-old grandson Rupert, whose parents were in India. Rupert had been left behind with his grandfather when she had hurried to take charge at Peter and Clarry's home.

'Which is not an arrangement that can continue for long,' she told her son sternly, 'Rupert being such a handful! I didn't like leaving him at all!'

'I expect the best thing would be to take Peter and the . . . er . . . the other one . . . back with you when you leave,' said the children's father hopefully as he sidled towards the door. 'And then all three cousins could be brought up together. Nicer,' he added, although he did not say for whom.

The children's grandmother had been expecting this proposal and had prepared a reply. She said very decisively that she would not dream of depriving Clarry and Peter of their father's company. 'Even if,' she added, 'at my age, I felt able to cope with bringing up three such very young children—'

'Sixty-five is nothing these days,' protested her panic-stricken son.

'I have my heart and my knees,' his mother said firmly. 'Your poor father has his chest. However,' she added (since a look of imminent orphanages was appearing in the panicking one's eyes), 'for the present I will stay here and help as best I can.'

To make it possible for Clarry and Peter's grandmother to stay with them, Rupert in Cornwall was packed off to boarding school. Then, for the next year or so, the children's grandmother juggled the interviewing of servants, the demands of her abandoned husband, Peter's rages, Clarry's teething and their father's total lack of interest.

'He's grieving,' suggested Miss Vane, who lived across the road.

'No, he isn't,' said the children's grandmother robustly.

'Then the poor man is still in shock.'

'Selfish,' said the children's grandmother. 'Also spoiled. I spoiled both my boys and now I suffer the consequences.'

'Mrs Penrose!' exclaimed Miss Vane.

'Spoiled, selfish, immature and irresponsible,' continued the children's grandmother.

Miss Vane laughed nervously and said that dear Mrs Penrose had a very droll sense of humour.

'If you insist,' said the children's grandmother as she wiped Clarry's chin for the hundredth time that afternoon and removed Peter from the coal scuttle. She considered it a great relief when a few days later she heard that her abandoned husband had caught pneumonia.

'There's no one in Cornwall that I trust to be capable of nursing him,' she told the children's father. 'Clarry is walking and almost talking. Peter is quite able to manage by himself. I have found you an excellent general servant who is fond of children, and I absolutely must go home!'

Then, despite Clarry's startled eyes, Peter's wails of 'Come back! Come back! Gramma, Gramma, Gramma, Gramma!' and their father's outraged disbelief, she hurried off to Cornwall, by way of horse-drawn cab, steam train and pony trap.

Fortunately for Peter and Clarry, and their despairing parent, in those days almost everybody was either a servant, or employed servants themselves. They were a part of life. Over

the next few years the children were cared for by one after another of a long stream of grumbling, hurrying, short-tempered, tired and underpaid women, who trundled, stomped, tiptoed and bustled through the house. They swept carpets with brooms, boiled puddings in saucepans, washed their charges' hands with hard yellow soap and their faces with the corners of aprons, carried coals, cleared ashes, fried chops, mopped tiles, polished shoes, chased away cats and pigeons, jerked hairbrushes through tangles, made stale-bread-and-milk suppers, shook dust from rugs, sat down with sighs and rose with groans, irritated the children's father with every breath they took, and left as soon as they possibly could to find work that wasn't so hard.

Inside the narrow house, the wallpaper faded and the furniture became shabby but the children grew and grew. Peter became such a nuisance that he was sent to a day school. There, he was discovered to be extremely clever, which Miss Vane said probably accounted for his often shocking temper. Clarry was not a nuisance; she was brown-haired and round-faced, and more or less happy. Miss Vane popped over the road to invite her to join her Sunday School class.

'She doesn't believe in God,' said nine-year-old Peter, who had answered the door. 'I've told her he's not true, haven't I, Clarry?'

Clarry, who had pushed under Peter's arm to smile at Miss Vane, nodded in agreement.

'I think I would prefer to talk about this with your father,' said Miss Vane.

'Father wouldn't listen,' said Peter, and then Mrs Morgan, by far the most long-lasting servant, came hurrying over, dislodged Peter from the doorknob with a bat from a damp dishcloth, removed Clarry's thumb from her mouth, ordered, 'Upstairs, the pair of you. You're forever where you're not wanted!' and told Miss Vane that she was sure Mr Penrose would be very pleased to have Clarry out of mischief for an hour or so on Sundays, and they'd send her across in something clean or as best as could be managed.

And this was the beginning of Miss Vane's Good Deed and Christian Duty of Keeping an Eye on the Family, which was sometimes helpful, and sometimes not, and often made Peter growl.

'I dare say she's one of those people who need to make themselves feel useful,' said the children's father to Mrs Morgan. 'She's offered to help sort out whatever it is the . . . Clarry wears. Her grandmother can't be relied on, since she still insists on living in Cornwall. Miss Vane is harmless enough. I can't see why anyone should find the arrangement a problem.'

'She stands too close and she smells of cats,' said Peter, after a particularly dreary Miss Vane afternoon.

'Cat *food*,' said Clarry fairly. 'Liver. She boils it. She was boiling it when I went there for her to pin up the hem on my dress.' Clarry sighed. Already she was suffering far more than Peter from their neighbour's helpfulness. Miss Vane took her for long, chilly walks, murmuring instructions about pleasant behaviour. She had knitted her an itchy striped scarf. And

when Clarry's winter dress was scorched beyond repair by Mrs Morgan drying it over the kitchen fire, Miss Vane had made a brand-new one in hideous green-and-mustard tartan. Clarry had had to stand on a chair while Miss Vane jerked and pulled and stuck in dozens of pins.

'The joins don't match and those brown buttons look awful,' Peter had remarked the first time she'd worn it. 'But I don't suppose anyone will care.'

'She's knitting you a scarf too,' Clarry told him.

'Let her,' said Peter. 'I'll drop it in the river.'

'You couldn't drop a scarf that a poor old lady has knitted for you into the river,' said Clarry, very shocked.

'I could. She's not poor either. She's not even that old.'

But to six-year-old Clarry, Miss Vane was very ancient indeed, and so were all Miss Vane's friends. Two of them ran a school for girls at the top of yet another tall, bare house. They were called the Miss Pinkses.

'The what?' asked Clarry's father.

'The Miss Pinkses,' repeated Miss Vane earnestly. 'I do agree, it *is* quaint. As is the school. Old-fashioned values. I mention it because it is just round the corner. I believe the girls start at about Clarry's age.'

'Her grandmother was saying that it was time I found her a school,' admitted Clarry's father, and the next thing Clarry knew, she was climbing the three flights of stairs to the Miss Pinkses' schoolrooms.

The first of many climbs, year after year.

At the Miss Pinkses', the light was dim, the street felt very

far away and there were always dead bluebottles lying upside down on the windowsills. By mid-afternoon the suffocating fumes from the oil stoves that warmed the rooms made heads ache and eyes blur, so that it was hard to stay awake.

But at least, as her father said, even if she didn't learn anything, she was out of the house.

