

CHAPTER ONE



Clara

Clara came awake in an instant. She sat up in bed, tingling with the knowledge that it was her birthday. On this very day, the puppet master Grisini would perform at her birthday party. If all went well, she would have tea with Grisini's children.

The room was dim. The curtains were drawn tight against the November chill. Clara gazed at them intently. If it was very foggy, Professor Grisini might not come. Everything would be ruined; her twelfth birthday would be like all the others, with a trip to Kensal Green in the morning and presents in the afternoon. Clara loved presents, but she dreaded the ceremony of opening them. It was ill-bred to show too much excitement, but if she wasn't grateful enough, she ran the risk of hurting her mother's feelings. Clara thrust the thought aside. This year she would do everything exactly right.

She flung back the coverlet and tiptoed across the nursery floor, noiseless as a thief. If anyone came in, she would be scolded for walking barefoot.

She reached the window and slipped her hand between the curtains. There were two sets between herself and the outside world: claret-colored velvet on top, frilled muslin next to the glass. The muslin was sooty from the London fogs; though the windows fit tightly, the fog always found its way in. Clara leaned forward and peered through the peephole she had made. Her face lit up.

The view that greeted her was dismal enough. The trees in the square had shed their leaves, and the city was dark with grime. But the sky was white, not gray; there was even a wisp of blue sky between two clouds. It was a rare clear day. Professor Grisini would surely come.

Clara let the curtains fall back together and turned her back to the window. She padded past her sisters' dollhouse and her brother's rocking horse, which she was not supposed to touch. Close to the toy cupboard hung her birthday dress. It was covered with an old sheet so that it would stay clean, but she could see the shape of it, with its puffed sleeves and billowing skirts. It was a beautiful dress, but childish; next year, when she was thirteen, she would wear longer skirts and a whalebone corset. Clara wasn't looking forward to that. Her present clothes were constrictive enough.

Footsteps were coming up the back stair. It was Agnes, the housemaid. In an instant Clara was back in bed. She hoisted the blankets to her shoulder and shut her eyes.

The door opened. Agnes set a pitcher of hot water on the washstand and went to stir the fire. "Wake up, Miss Clara."

Clara sat up, blinking. She could not have said why she felt she needed to hide the fact that she was awake. Her secrecy was chronic and instinctive. She put her hand over her mouth as if to stifle a yawn. "Good morning, Agnes."

“Good morning, miss.”

“Agnes, I’m twelve.” The words came out in a joyful rush. “I’m twelve years old today.”

Agnes knew it. No one in the Wintermute household had been allowed to forget that November the sixth was Clara’s birthday. The servants had cleaned the house from top to bottom and decorated the dining room with white ribbons and evergreen boughs. Seventeen children had been invited to Clara’s party, and their mothers would come with them. There was to be a lavish tea: sandwiches and ices and a four-layer cake.

“Many happy returns, miss.” Agnes twitched the corner of the counterpane. “Now, get up. None of this lying about in bed.”

Clara had no intention of lying about. She wanted the day to begin. She drew back the covers as Agnes knelt by the bed and held out her slippers. Clara slid her feet into them and lifted her arms so that Agnes could put on her dressing gown. As the maid started to make the bed, Clara went to the washstand. She washed her face carefully, brushed her teeth, and checked her fingernails to make sure they hadn’t turned grimy overnight. “Is it fine today, Agnes?”

Agnes left the bed to draw the curtains. “Fine enough to have your party. Your Mr. What’s-his-name’ll come with his puppets.”

“Grisini,” Clara said obligingly. “The Phenomenal Professor Grisini and His Venetian *Fantoccini*.” She had memorized his handbill three weeks ago, the day she first saw him.

Agnes made a noise like *mffmp*. She had once been nursey maid to the Wintermute children, and she felt it gave her certain privileges —among them, the right to make noises when she felt Clara was being spoiled.

“I don’t see what you want with foreign puppets, Miss Clara. English Punch and Judy is good enough for most children.”

Clara looked meek, but she objected. “The *fantoccini* are different from Punch and Judy, Agnes. You’ll see when Professor Grisini gives the show. They work with strings —only you don’t see the strings. They’re like fairies.”

Agnes gave the curls a final twitch. Clara held out her comb, appealing for help. Clara’s hair was as wild as sedate, and only Agnes could subdue it. Armed with skill and patience, Agnes could turn Clara’s thatch of dark curls into twenty ringlets, ten on either side of a center part.

Agnes accepted the comb and went to work. Clara took her prayer book from the dressing table and opened to the section for morning prayers. She locked her knees and held her head still as Agnes dragged at the knots in her hair. Clara had once heard her mother’s maid say, “There’s many a grown-up lady that doesn’t hold still like Miss Clara. Miss Clara’s as steady as a rock.”

Clara liked that. Most of the time when she eavesdropped, she heard about how spoiled she was. She supposed it was true. She made extra work for the servants, and her parents cosseted her, worrying endlessly about her health. Her father inspected the nursery weekly, using his pocket handkerchief to check for drafts, and the nursery fire was kept burning even in summer. Clara’s birthday frock had been made by the finest dressmaker in London, and she knew her presents would be many and expensive.

What she hadn’t expected was that her father would allow Professor Grisini to perform at the party. Since the moment Clara first saw the puppet caravan —and the children who worked the puppets —she had thought of little else. She had come upon the puppet stage in Hyde Park. It was a tedious afternoon, gray and chill, with patches of heavy fog. Her governess, Miss Cameron, had stopped to talk to a nursemaid from the

other side of the square. The two women gossiped for half an hour. Their conversation was so dull that Clara gave up trying to follow it. She waited stoically, trying not to fidget. Then she glimpsed the caravan, shining scarlet though the fog.

She asked Miss Cameron if she could watch the puppet show, and gained permission. She hurried down to the miniature stage, only to realize that she was watching the show from the wrong side.

It was even more interesting than watching from the front. She was seeing what no one was meant to see. She noted the two racks set up behind the stage, each hung with puppets, and the black curtain that covered the puppet workers' heads. At intervals, the puppet master would reach back without looking and nip a new puppet off the rack. The master's apprentice was so small that he stood on a wooden box. He was skinny and his trousers were ragged, but he was as deft as his master. Even from the wrong side of the stage, Clara could sense how skillful he was.

The third member of the party was a girl in her early teens. She was the only member of the company whose face Clara could see, and it was an interesting face: pale, pointed, and wistful. The girl had long red hair and carried herself with the grace of a dancer. She provided the music for the show, switching back and forth between a flute, a tambourine, and a small violin. From time to time she glided up to the backdrop and handled one of the manikins. The three puppet workers worked together seamlessly. Clara was fascinated. She wondered what it would be like to spend her days in the streets and parks of London, instead of learning lessons in a schoolroom.

She watched until the show came to an end. The audience applauded. The red-haired girl picked up a brightly painted box and went to collect the coins from the crowd. Clara fumbled in

her purse until she found a half crown. She wished it were a sovereign. The red-haired girl accepted it with a little curtsy. She met Clara's eyes and smiled.

It was an extraordinarily friendly smile. Clara was struck to the heart. Improbable as it might seem, this girl—who was graceful and clever and older than she—liked her. Of the seventeen children who were coming to her birthday party, there was not one, Clara felt, who really liked her. They were the children of her parents' friends, who lived in Chester Square. Clara thought them dull, and she suspected that they pitied her and thought her queer. But the red-haired girl liked her. Of that Clara was sure.

She had scarcely had time to tell the girl how much she had enjoyed the show before the puppet master sidled over. He bowed before Clara, a florid showman's bow: knee bent, wrists cocked, toe flexed. A dirty handbill materialized between his fingertips. He stayed frozen in his jester's position until Clara ventured forward and took the handbill. There was something unnerving about the fixed grin on his face. Clara felt that in drawing near to him, she was being a little bit brave.

That night, she gave the handbill to her father and begged to have the puppets at her birthday party.

Dr. Wintermute refused. Professor Grisini was a foreigner; foreigners were invariably dirty and often ill. Clara pleaded. Dr. Wintermute said that the whole thing was out of the question. Clara, accepting defeat, did not argue, but she wept. That settled matters. Spoiled or not, Clara did not cry often. When she did, she generally got her way.

Thinking about the children coming made Clara forget to be as steady as a rock. She twitched, shifting her weight to the balls of her feet.

“Hold still, Miss Clara!” snapped Agnes.

Clara stiffened. She lowered her lashes and raised the corners of her mouth, so that she didn’t look sullen. Neither Agnes nor her governess had any patience with sulking. Clara had, in fact, practiced her present expression in the mirror. It was a neutral expression, a coy mask of a smile. Over the years, it had served her well.

“Your mother wants you dressed and ready to go by nine o’clock,” Agnes said after completing another ringlet. “She said you should wear the blue cashmere and your sealskins. It’ll be cold at Kensal Green.”

“Thank you, Agnes,” said Clara. The expression on her face was sweetly placid. No one must ever guess how much she hated going to Kensal Green.

“Cook’s been busy all morning, decorating your birthday cake”—Agnes brushed another ringlet around her finger—“and your mother had so many presents to wrap, she asked the maids to help her. I don’t know what a little girl can want with so many presents.”

Clara hesitated. “Agnes, do you know —?”

The words hung fire. Agnes gave one shoulder a shove. “Out with it.”

“If she bought presents for the Others?”

Agnes took in her breath and let it out again. “If you mean your brothers and sisters, yes, she did, Miss Clara, and there’s no point in you staring down at the floor and pouting.”

“I’m not pouting,” Clara protested softly. She lifted her chin and resumed her doll-like smile. Her cheeks burned. She didn’t want the Others to be part of her birthday. She was ashamed, but she couldn’t help herself.

“You know how your mother is, Miss Clara,” Agnes said

firmly. “It’s like that going to Kensal Green. It don’t change, and it won’t change.”

Clara lowered her eyes to the prayer book. For a moment or two, she was silent, apparently reading. Then she raised her head. “Agnes,” she said tremulously, “there’s something I want you to help me with. Something I want dreadfully.”

Agnes exchanged the comb for the brush. “I’m sure I don’t know what it could be, miss. I don’t suppose Princess Victoria had as many frocks as you have, nor such toys, neither.”

Clara’s stomach tightened. Once Agnes got started on how lucky she was, she was likely to go on a long time. There wasn’t time to waste. She spun around. “Please,” she begged, “please —”

Agnes dropped the brush. Clara dove for it and held it out to her.

“What is it?” demanded Agnes.

“I want to give tea to the children,” Clara answered. “Professor Grisini’s children. You see, Agnes, that’s why I wanted the puppet show so much —because of the children. There’s a girl and a boy. The boy works the *fantoccini*, and the girl can play the flute and the fiddle. She was ever so nice.” She caught hold of Agnes’s hands. “I want to talk to them —just them —with no one else about; no grown-ups. They’re so clever —they must know so many things I don’t. Think of it, Agnes. They earn their own living!”

Agnes’s mouth twisted. At Clara’s age, Agnes had been a scullery maid. She saw no romance in earning a living “You know that’s wrong, miss. Your mother wouldn’t like it a bit. And what would your little friends think, having to take tea with common children like those Greaseenies?”

Clara shook her head. “Oh, I don’t mean that! Of course it

wouldn't do to have them with the other children! But we could have tea before the party, if you'll help. You see, Professor Grisini will be here to set up the stage at two, and the guests won't come till three. I thought perhaps—if the professor was given a hot drink in the kitchen, I could have a tray for the children." She tugged at Agnes's hands. "Please, Agnes! Just toast—and tea—and jam. And then, I've made them both a little parcel to take home—oranges and sweets. Please, Agnes!"

Agnes jerked her hands out of Clara's. "I don't know what you'll take a fancy for next, Miss Clara. Taking tea with dirty foreigners?"

Clara sidestepped the question. "They're not dirty," she pleaded, which wasn't true; the girl had looked clean, but the man and the boy were very dirty. "And they're not foreigners. The professor is, but the girl is as English as I am, and she talks like a lady. *Please, Agnes.*"

"Miss Cameron won't allow it," Agnes said. She expected this argument to clinch the matter—there was no chance that Clara's governess would approve of Clara's mingling with common children—but Clara was ready for her.

"Mamma gave Miss Cameron a half day," she answered. "She's going to visit her sister in Islington and won't be back until three."

Agnes tried another tack. "You know how your father feels about people tracking dirt into the nursery—"

Clara interrupted her. "They needn't come up to the nursery. We could take tea in the drawing room, where they set up the stage. I could watch them set up. Oh, please, Agnes!"

Agnes snorted. "You're stagestruck, that's what you are."

Clara switched tactics. "If you're too busy," she said daringly,

“I could carry the tea tray myself. I could put my pinafore over my birthday frock and creep down the back staircase and ask Cook —”

“You, miss!” exclaimed Agnes. “Carrying trays! I’d like to see you, going up them steep steps with your hands full! Why, you’d drop the tray —and ruin your dress —and tumble downstairs!”

“I shouldn’t mind if I did,” Clara said recklessly. “I shouldn’t — not one bit —if I could have tea with the children. Oh, Agnes, please help me!” She caught the maidservant’s hands in hers. “It’s the thing I want most in all the world! And it’s my birthday!”

Agnes pulled her hands free.

“Now, that’s enough, Miss Clara. I suppose I can manage a tray around quarter after two —only it’ll be for you, mind you, not for them. If you choose to share your tea with ’em, that’s none of my business —and you’re not to say more than you have to, if anybody should ask.” She put her hands on Clara’s shoulders, checking Clara’s embrace. “I said, that’s enough. You know your mother wouldn’t like you hugging and kissing the servants.”

Clara didn’t answer. Her ears had caught the sound of footsteps on the front stairs. The nursery door opened. “Clara, dearest!”

Clara went to her mother. Mrs. Wintermute was tall, shapely, and dressed in black. Her face was youthful, though her light-brown hair was turning white. Clara embraced her tenderly, careful not to crush her mother’s dress.

“Clara, dear, aren’t you dressed yet?”

“No, Mamma. It’s my fault, Mamma. Agnes told me to hold still so she could arrange my hair, but I wouldn’t.”

Mrs. Wintermute smiled forgivingly. “I expect you’re excited.” A faint crease appeared on her brow. “You’re rather flushed, dear.”

She placed the backs of her fingers against Clara's cheek and then her forehead.

"I'm very well, Mamma."

"It's the excitement, madam," added Agnes.

Mrs. Wintermute relaxed. "Of course. Clara, dear, your papa was called out this morning, but he hopes to be home in time for the party. I hope you're not disappointed. We planned to give you your special present at breakfast."

"I don't mind waiting, Mamma," Clara said earnestly.

Mrs. Wintermute held up her right hand. In it was a velvet box. "Papa said we needn't wait—that I might give it to you now. We thought you might want to wear it to the party."

Clara raised her eyes to her mother's face, received a nod of permission, and took the box into her hands. It was round and soft, a desirable object in its own right. Carefully she slid her fingernails under the lid and opened it. "Oh!"

Inside was a locket: a golden oval with a band of deep-blue enamel, a circle of seed pearls, and a sapphire in the center. Clara gasped with wonder. She tilted the locket and watched the sapphire flash; it was a deep, mysterious blue, almost black.

Mrs. Wintermute smiled with her eyes full of tears. "Open it."

CHAPTER TWO



Lizzie Rose

Lizzie Rose was hungry. As she pushed the puppet stage through the street, her nostrils drew in savory odors from the street vendors: roasted chestnuts, baked potatoes, and coffee. Her stomach growled, complaining that she had eaten nothing since breakfast. At noontime, Grisini had bought his usual sausage roll—she could smell the garlic on his breath—but he hadn't brought anything home. That was Grisini. Some days he came home with sausage rolls or meat pies and announced a feast, kissing his fingertips in praise of his own generosity. Other days, he crept off like a cat and slunk back satisfied, never bothering as to whether Parsefall or Lizzie Rose had anything to eat.

Lizzie Rose sniffed. Parsefall had eaten, too. Underneath his dirty-little-boy smell, she caught a whiff of cabbage and fat bacon, spoils from their landlady's kitchen. He must have cadged something to eat from Mrs. Pinchbeck. Lizzie Rose was glad for him—it worried her that Parsefall was so thin—but she

couldn't help thinking that he was as bad as Grisini. He didn't share. If she had begged food from Mrs. Pinchbeck, she would have given some to him.

The wheel of the puppet theatre caught on the curb. Grisini, at the front of the caravan, waited for Lizzie Rose to lift it free. Lizzie Rose grasped the underside of the cart and jerked upward. For the thousandth time she read the legend on the back: THE PHENOMENAL PROFESSOR GRISINI AND HIS VENETIAN FANTOCCINI. The letters were jet-black, adorned with gold curlicues. Lizzie Rose had watched Grisini repaint them a week ago. Grisini painted with his eyes half shut and his brush looping crazily: first the letters and then a canal scene of Venice, with winged lions and gondolas and a dancer in a black mask. The colors were weirdly bright and the letters almost too fancy to read, but the effect could not have been bettered. That, too, was Grisini: a bad guardian, a bad man perhaps, but a matchless artist.

"Foxy-Loxy," hissed Parsefall, "it's my turn to push."

Lizzie Rose ignored him. She knew she looked like a fox, with her reddish hair and narrow face, but she wasn't going to put up with being called Foxy-Loxy. Her father had named her for a queen, and her mother had named her for a flower. She tossed her hair over her shoulders, lips prim.

"Ain't you tired?" persisted Parsefall.

"Don't say 'ain't,'" Lizzie Rose corrected him. She went on pushing the puppet theatre. The little caravan was top-heavy, and the wheels were worn. Even with Grisini pulling it, it wasn't easy to maneuver. The two children generally took turns at the back end, but Lizzie Rose tried to make sure she had the lion's share of the pushing. Parsefall wasn't much younger than she, but he was considerably smaller, and to Lizzie Rose he looked frail.

Lizzie Rose worried about Parsefall. She had lived with

Grisini less than two years, and Parsefall was still a mystery to her. Five years ago, Grisini had taken him from the workhouse to serve as apprentice; before that, the boy seemed to have no past. He was skillful with the puppets and practiced ferociously, almost if he were trying to get back at someone who had wronged him. Sometimes Lizzie Rose came upon him working the puppets with his legs crossed and a look of anguish on his face; he was so caught up with his work that he had forgotten to empty his bladder.

Except for his industry, he had few good qualities. He was selfish and rude, and his personal habits were disgusting. Nevertheless, Lizzie Rose loved him, as she might have loved a small wild animal she was trying to tame. She had a chivalrous tenderness for anyone weaker than herself, and she knew Parsefall was often afraid. Lizzie Rose's sense of smell was extraordinarily acute, and the stench of fear was unmistakable. Parsefall reeked of it, especially when Grisini was in his darker moods. The boy had nightmares; sometimes such bad nightmares that he wet the bed.

"Come on," Parsefall urged her obstinately. "S'my turn." He turned his back to her so that she could drag the canvas sack off his shoulders and ease it onto her own. He took the back handle of the puppet stage and began to steer it through the streets.

Lizzie Rose gave in. It was a relief to be able to walk without banging her knees against the caravan. She patted Parsefall's shoulder by way of a thank-you. She knew that he disliked being touched, but she didn't care. She needed to pet someone, and nobody could pet Grisini.

They passed a tea stall. Lizzie Rose's stomach growled again. She felt in her pocket and found threepence. On the way home, the buns would be marked down to two a penny. Parsefall adored

buns. *It would serve him right if I didn't share*, thought Lizzie Rose, but she knew she would share. She would even keep a morsel of bread in her pocket for Ruby, Mrs. Pinchbeck's spaniel.

She sighed. The takings from the puppet theatre had been poor lately. Grisini was surely, and she dared not ask him for money, but she and Parsefall needed many things that Grisini never bothered to provide. Parsefall's boots were riddled with holes, and his cleanest shirt was dark with grime. Lizzie Rose was tall for her age and growing rapidly; her frocks were much too small. The late Mrs. Fawcett had lavished love and skill on her daughter's clothes. They had been made of the best cloth she could afford, with tucks to let out and hems to let down. Now, a year and a half after her mother's death, Lizzie Rose had opened the last of the tucks and pressed the hem flat. The skirt was still too short.

Lizzie Rose thought wistfully of the days when she worked with her parents in the theatre. There had been times when there was little money, but her mother had always managed it so that she didn't look shabby. Lizzie Rose was a striking child, with her bright hair and transparent complexion. Her parents had taught her to carry herself well and to speak clearly. The Fawcetts had not been rich, but they had been loving and comfortable. It had been a happy life.

"'Sthere." Parsefall pointed. "That's the way. Shortcut. Down that alley, and we'll come to Chester Square."

Grisini jerked the wagon forward. Neither he nor Lizzie Rose questioned the boy's knowledge of the streets. Parsefall's sense of direction was unerring. He could find his way even through fog.

The little procession passed through an alley and came out into the square. There was a large garden, surrounded on four

sides by tall houses. The garden, with its bare flower beds and iron fencing, was dreary enough on a wet November day, but Lizzie Rose could imagine how pretty it might be in the springtime.

She craned her neck to look up at the houses. They were tall and stately, with columns on either side of the door. The windows were heavily draped, but the rooms beyond them looked warm and bright. Whoever lived here had money enough for fires in every room, and an army of housemaids to stoke them. Lizzie Rose tried to imagine what it would be like to live year-round in a house like this one, with ample coal in winter and a garden in the spring.

“Shall we knock at the front door?” Grisini flung out one arm as if about to dedaim poetry. “Shall we ring and present ourselves to the butler? Shall we say to him, ‘The children of joy have come!’?” Grisini spread his fingers like the sticks of a fan and touched his middle finger to his breast. “Never forget that we, with our puppets and tambourines, are the children of joy! Let us go forth and bring laughter to the children of woe!”

Lizzie Rose and Parsefall exchanged looks of pure irritation. They knew very well that they would be turned away from the front door. Parsefall jerked his head toward the tradesmen’s entrance, a half flight of stairs below the pavement. Lizzie Rose gave the wagon a shove, and Parsefall darted forward so that the two of them could wrestle it down the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE



Parsefall

Never, thought Parsefall, surveying the Wintermute drawing room, had he seen a house better stocked with things to steal.

It had not been easy, getting the puppet theatre up to the drawing room. There was an outcry when it was discovered that the caravan was too wide to go through the tradesmen's entrance, and another when the housemaids saw that the wheels were caked with filth from the London streets. Hot water and brushes were fetched so that Lizzie Rose and Parsefall could scrub the caravan clean. While the children scrubbed, Grisini paid his respects to the Wintermute servants, fawning and coaxing by turns. By the time the miniature theatre was parked at one end of the drawing room, Grisini was quite at home, and the butler invited him to take tea in the servants' hall.

Parsefall knew what that meant. *Tea* meant gin and hot water; he and Lizzie Rose would have to set up the theatre by themselves. He shrugged off his jacket and turned to Lizzie

Rose. She was gazing round the drawing room as if it were fairyland. "It's very grand," she said, almost whispering, "ain't it?"

Parsefall eyed her askance. "You said I mustn't say 'ain't.'"

"So I did." Lizzie Rose smiled at him. "'Tain't elegant."

Parsefall gave a sniff of disgust and turned away. One of the things that bothered him about Lizzie Rose was the way she was kind to him when he was doing his best to irritate her. He found it unner ving. Parsefall liked things to be fair : eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

The children began to set up the theatre. The front of the caravan pulled down, covering the wheels, and the sides unfolded like shutters, adding width to the miniature stage. Lizzie Rose unrolled the canvas that hid the puppet workers from the audience. Parsefall set up the puppet rack and hung the puppets on it. Lizzie Rose unpacked the contents of the canvas sack: a set of glass chimes, a tambourine, a tin sheet for making thunder, and a small violin called a kit.

Parsefall eyed the clock on the mantel. There was plenty of time before the show. He would be able to set up perfectly — Parsefall was finicky about setting up — and still have time to steal something. He cast a furtive glance at Lizzie Rose. She had no idea what a skillful thief he was. Grisini wanted her kept in the dark.

The door opened, and a little girl came into the room. She stood aside as a maid servant in a black uniform entered with a tea tray. "Thank you, Agnes," said the girl, and the maid servant set the tray on the table and left the room.

Parsefall stared at the little girl. He didn't bother much about girls — it was well known that they weren't as good as boys — but this was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. She looked like a puppet of the very finest quality. Her eyes shone like blue glass,

matching the color of her sash. Her ringlets were as neat as quills of black paper, and her skin was as smooth as wax. And her dress! To Parsefall, who lived in perpetual dinginess, it was blindingly, impossibly white: a frothy confection that showed plump shoulders at one end and embroidered stockings at the other. But though Miss Wintermute was beautiful, she was not graceful. She held herself stiffly and moved as if by clockwork.

She made a slight, imperious gesture toward the tea tray. “Good afternoon. How do you do?”

Parsefall jammed his hands in his pockets. Lizzie Rose spoke for them both. “We’re very well, miss. Thank you, miss.”

The little girl clasped her hands behind her back. “I’m very glad to see you. I hoped you might have tea with me.” She sounded suddenly shy. “We met in Hyde Park three weeks ago — I don’t suppose you remember?” She paused as if she hoped they would answer. “My name is Clara Wintermute.”

“I think I remember you,” Lizzie Rose said unconvincingly. Lizzie Rose was a poor liar. She didn’t get much practice.

Parsefall looked impatiently at the tea tray. There were three cups and a dish with a folded napkin in it. He wondered what was inside the napkin. Something buttery, he hoped: crumpets or muffins.

“Do you?” fluttered Clara. “I’m very glad. I admire you both so much — I wanted you to come for my birthday.” She gestured toward the table again. “Do sit down. There’s hot buttered toast in the dish — and strawberry jam.”

“We’d love tea, thank you,” Lizzie Rose said happily. “Wouldn’t we, Parsefall?”

Parsefall pulled out a chair and slumped into it. The two girls became irritatingly ladylike, murmuring courtesies about sugar and milk. Parsefall rested his elbows on the table and gnawed

his toast. He knew better —Lizzie Rose was attempting to teach him table manners—but something about little Miss Wintermute made him want to be rude on a larger scale than usual. He slathered his toast with jam and sucked his fingers.

“This is ever so kind, miss.” Lizzie Rose set her teacup in the saucer. “A cup of tea is always a treat, especially on a cold day.”

Clara spoke impetuously. “Oh, please—! Won’t you call me Clara? I know I seem—” She waved a hand, indicating the ornate room around them. Her cheeks reddened.

Lizzie Rose helped her out. “My name is Elizabeth Rose Fawcett. This is my brother, Parsefall.”

“My brother, Parsefall,” Parsefall corrected her around a mouthful of toast. “My last name’s Hooke.”

“He isn’t my brother by birth,” Lizzie Rose explained, “but we have the same guardian, so I call him my brother.” Her eyes went to one of the paintings on the wall. “Are those your brothers and sisters?”

Parsefall looked at the painting. He had not examined it before, since it was much too large to steal. Now that he looked at it, it struck him as queer and therefore interesting. It was huge, with a gold frame full of swirls and little holes. Five life-size children stood together in a tangle of garden. The light suggested that it was early evening, and they had been gathering flowers. There were two girls with long golden hair. The taller of the two leaned against a broken column; the other held a small child on her lap and crowned him with a daisy chain. A boy with curly hair and laughing eyes stood next to a dark-haired girl with ringlets. It was evidently Clara Wintermute, but she looked younger in the picture, and as though she didn’t quite belong. The other children stood like deer poised for flight; the air around their

bodies was faintly luminous, like mist or pale fire. Beside them, Clara looked dense and stiff: a wooden statue.

A little gasp came from Lizzie Rose. Parsefall looked back at the two girls. Something had passed between them. Lizzie Rose reached across the table to press Clara's hand.

"I'm so sorry," Lizzie Rose whispered.

Clara shook her head violently.

Parsefall gaped at them, feeling as if a joke had been told and he'd missed the punch line. "Wot is it?" he demanded.

"They're —" Lizzie Rose lowered her voice. "They're in heaven, aren't they? I'm so sorry."

"Wot?" repeated Parsefall.

Clara spoke brusquely. "My brothers and sisters are dead."

Parsefall considered this. His eyes went back to the painting. "All of 'em?" he said incredulously.

Lizzie Rose hissed. "Parsefall!"

"There was cholera." Clara spoke hurriedly, as if eager to get the explanation over with. "Quentin was just a baby. That's Selina by the column — she was the eldest. She was seven, and Adelaide was six, and Charles Augustus and I were five. He was my twin." She hesitated a moment and plunged on. "Papa thinks the contagion was in the water cress. I was naughty that day. I've never liked eating green things, and I wouldn't eat the water cress at tea. So I wasn't ill, but the others died." She bent her head and brought up one hand as if to cover her face. "Of course, it was dreadful for Mamma. For Papa, too, but Mamma nearly died of grief." She cleared her throat. "It was seven years ago. I'm twelve years old today."

Parsefall looked back at the picture. "You're five years old in that?" he asked, jerking his thumb at the canvas.

“Not in that picture,” Clara told him. “That was painted four years ago. Mamma had an artist come to the house —she wanted a picture of the way they might have looked, if only they’d lived. Of course we have photographs —and their death masks.” She indicated four white casts over the piano. “Mamma says we must keep them alive by thinking of them all the time. We must never forget them or stop loving them.”

Parsefall stared at the death masks on the wall. “Wot’s a death mask?”

Lizzie Rose kicked him under the table.

“They take plaster,” Clara said very calmly, “and press it over the —the dear one’s face. And then later take more plaster and make a mask. That way—” She stopped and covered her mouth with her hand. She did not seem grief-stricken so much as embarrassed.

Parsefall’s eyes went back to the four white casts. “That’s nasty,” he said. “Stickin’ plaster on somebody’s face wot’s dead. It’s ’orrible.”

Lizzie Rose kicked him a second time, harder. But Clara’s blue eyes met Parsefall’s. Something flashed between them. It was almost as if she said, *I think so, too.*

“It’s good to remember the dead,” said Lizzie Rose. “My mother and father died of diphtheria a year and a half ago. It makes me sorrowful to remember them, but it’s good, too. I think of my father when I practice my music, because he taught me to play. And I sleep with my mother’s Bible under my pillow. I have her ice skates and a pair of coral earrings set in gold. Of course, I’m too young to pierce my ears, so Mr. Grisini is taking care of them for me. But he’ll let me have them when I’m sixteen.”

Parsefall snorted. He had a very good idea how Grisini had

taken care of Lizzie Rose's earrings. He'd seen the tick from the pawnshop. He pointed to the teapot, and Clara reached for it. "Would you like another cup of tea?"

Both children accepted. Parsefall saw one piece of toast remaining, broke it in half, and gave part to Lizzie Rose. Lizzie Rose rolled her eyes at him to signal that this was bad manners, but Parsefall didn't care.

Clara took her last sip of tea —she hadn't had any toast, Parsefall noticed. Her eyes strayed to the puppet theatre.

"Would you like to see the puppets?" Lizzie Rose asked, and Clara's face lit up. "Come and see."

The children left the table —Parsefall with a piece of toast between his fingers. "We carry them in bags to keep them clean," Lizzie Rose explained proudly; the calico bags had been her own invention. "The fog makes everything dirty. Before the show, we unwrap them and hang them on the rack —"

"The gallows," Parsefall corrected her. He grinned ghoulishly at Clara. "It's called the gallows. We hang 'em on the gallows, just like men." But Clara was too intrigued to be squeamish.

"We have to set them up just so, because it's dark under the curtain," said Lizzie Rose. "I make their costumes —Grisini can sew as well as I can, but he doesn't like to. I just made a new frock for Little Red Riding Hood —isn't she pretty?"

Clara admired the puppet with her hands behind her back. She looked as if she were used to being told not to touch things. Lizzie Rose had an inspiration. "Would you like to work Little Red? You hold her by the crutch —that's the wooden bit at the end —and pull the strings."

Clara dangled the puppet. Timidly she jerked a string. One wooden leg kicked.

"The hardest thing is making them walk," Lizzie Rose told

her. “It’s easy to make the *fantoccini* dance, but hard to make them walk —isn’t that funny? I still float them sometimes — that’s what we call it when their feet don’t touch the floor. That’s a sign of a bad worker. Let Parsefall show you.”

Parsefall took the Devil from the gallows and made him saunter toward Clara. The manikin had joints at the ankles; he walked with a swagger, but his wooden feet brushed the carpet with every step. Clara squeaked with delight and clapped her hands.

“Grisini and Parsefall do the figure working,” Lizzie Rose explained. “I play the music. I’m not good enough to work the *fantoccini*, unless Grisini and Parsefall have their hands full. But Parsefall’s good.” She laid a hand on Parsefall’s shoulder. “Parsefall has magic in his fingers.”

Clara looked at Parsefall’s hands. She gave a faint start.

Parsefall understood why. His fingers were clever enough, but there were only nine of them. The little finger on his right hand was missing. There was no scar, nothing ugly to see. It was just that the little finger was not there. Parsefall didn’t know what had become of it. He was almost certain he had once had ten fingers, and it tormented him that he couldn’t remember what had become of the one he lost.

“You’re so clever,” Clara said admiringly. “Both of you. You know how to make the wagon into a stage, and play music, and work the puppets.” She sighed. “I wish I could do things.”

“I’m sure you can, miss,” Lizzie Rose soothed her, but Clara shook her head.

“No. I embroider, of course, and I can play the piano, but there isn’t any use in it. Mamma doesn’t like music, because it makes her head ache, and we have too many cushions already.” She swept the room with a glance that was almost contemptuous.

It reminded Parsefall of what he had intended earlier—to rid this room of one of the objects that crowded it.

“Would you like to help me take the rest of the *fantoccini* out of the bags?” Lizzie Rose asked, and Clara brightened at once.

“Oh, yes, please! May I?”

Parsefall hung the Devil puppet back on the gallows and turned his back. The two girls went on talking. The chirping, purring sounds in their voices seemed to indicate that they were becoming friends, but Parsefall paid no attention to their words. He was searching the room for something to steal.

What should he take? The room was stocked with valuables, many of them small enough to be portable. Parsefall knew what he wanted: something that would fit in his pocket without making a telltale bulge, something valuable but not so precious that its absence would be noticed immediately. He surveyed a table full of knickknacks: a mosaic box, a wreath of wax flowers under glass, three china babies with gilded wings, and an assortment of photographs in silver frames. Another table held a porcelain bowl full of dead rose petals, a prayer book with mother-of-pearl covers, and more photographs.

One of the smallest photographs had a round frame with tiny pearls going around the edge. Parsefall eyed it speculatively. Pearls were worth money, and the silver was probably real. There were half a dozen other photographs on the table. That was good; the absence of one might go undetected for some time. He glanced at Clara and Lizzie Rose, saw that they were occupied with the puppets, and his hand shot out. Another moment, and the photograph was in his pocket.

CHAPTER FOUR



The Fantoccini

At half past four in the afternoon, Clara led her guests upstairs to the drawing room and invited them to seat themselves before the stage. The youngest children sat on the floor with Clara. Older children chose footstools, and their mothers sat on chairs assembled from all over the house. Clara's governess, Miss Cameron, shared a sofa with Mrs. Wintermute. The servants in the back of the room watched standing.

Agnes dimmed the lamps, leaving most of the room in semi-darkness. The little theatre stood in a pool of light. One of the footmen coughed. The door opened, and Clara's father stole inside. Clara was glad. She had been afraid that Dr. Wintermute would be too busy to see the show.

There was a rattle from Parsefall's tambourine, and Lizzie Rose played a weird little melody on the flute. The miniature curtains lifted and parted, revealing a painted wood and a wolf in a green satin frock coat.

The wolf tilted his head and began to speak. Gesticulating with one paw, he told the audience how hungry he was and how he longed for a little child to eat. He spoke so plaintively that Clara fully sympathized with him. Then Red Riding Hood took the stage. The little puppet in her red cloak was dainty and innocent; it seemed cruel that she should be the wolf's prey. Clara locked her fingers together, caught between warring desires. Around her, the audience was held in thrall. The children in the front row no longer saw the strings that worked the puppets. The miniature actors appeared to swell in size; their painted features looked as if they smiled and frowned.

Red Riding Hood was tricked, devoured, and reborn by the ax of the hunter. The front curtain dropped, while Lizzie Rose played the kit and Parsefall changed the backdrop. The curtain lifted to reveal a Venetian street scene, complete with hump-backed bridges and moving gondolas. A handsome young puppet lamented his lack of money. A stranger with a plumed hat overheard his complaint and offered to sell him a magic bottle with a demon inside it. The Bottle Imp, he explained, would grant him all the gold in the world—only he must sell it before he died, or risk the fires of hell. Ten minutes later, the hero lay at death's door, and the demon leaped out of his bottle with a clap of thunder. He was sea green, with horns sprouting from his temples and bat wings instead of arms. His countenance was so frightful that one little girl left her seat on the floor and plunged into her mother's lap.

But the play was not yet over. A maiden with golden curls nursed the hero back to health. In the end, the stranger with the plumed hat was tricked into buying back the bottle, and the hero married his golden-haired sweetheart. The children clapped lustily. Before their hands had stopped