

## **'DEAREST CLARA'**

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*It was the most glorious of mornings, the most beautiful of days, the day Clara was handed the parcel that would seal her fate.*

### Introductions

It is a world renowned fact that a young man of a certain age must be in want of a wife, and if that young man happened to have the pleasures of a large fortune and of a gentleman's upbringing then it would be necessary to arrange with gentleman's daughter, a young lady with charm, manners and an inheritance.

Now, when a young gentleman of such qualities relocates into a new parish, the families of the compatible young ladies, of that area, like to make their daughters known and waste nothing in their eagerness to make acquaintance with the eligible bachelor. And such was what occurred in the family of Clara Nightingale.

"Mr Nightingale, you must understand this would be a wonderfully desirable opportunity for my darling sisters and I, a small fortune of 3 to 4 thousand a year so we may be supported in comfort and your wants provided for – you must go and make his acquaintance as soon as the chance may arise as it would be improper for us, even accompanied by mother, to make his acquaintance singularly!"

"I bear your point with good will but I have no interest for the man, but, for my children, I will make his acquaintance with this gentleman as soon as the chance may arise, my darling Clara, but for now run along as I have much else to contend with; the apothecary meeting and such like."

The acquaintance of the two gentlemen soon became a companionship and a dinner was organised with swift readiness and Mr Swan was seen to show particular attention to Miss Clara Nightingale. And so began the future acquaintance of the Nightingale family with the Swan family.

This attention soon blossomed into an evident admiration and a marriage proposal was soon expected.

It arrived whilst they were in Mrs Nightingale's small rose garden; it was to be a small wedding in the local church and then, with the promise of sun and a picnic outside, it was just as she had always dreamt; perfect.

### Eyam – 2005

The day of Pippa's trip her mother had taken her out for tea, as was customary before anyone left the house for longer than 3 days, which is exactly what Pippa planned to do. Her mother had seemed a little edgy all day but Pippa knew better than to question it and they chatted easily until about 10 minutes before they were planned to leave, when her mother handed her a note; she told Pippa in a sharp whisper not to open it and to go and visit the woman at 'Rose Cottage, east of the small church – covered in flowers and creepers up the walls, thatched.' She gave little other explanation and they soon left, Pippa still in the dark.

She arrived in Eyam at 5:52 p.m., just as the sun began to sink down to the west and the shadows were creeping in. She wandered round the small picturesque village for about one hour and wondered at its miniscule perfect cottages and listened to the clear, melodic bird song piercing the warm crisp evening. She wandered like this until she came to a small plaque denouncing the deaths of 9 poor people of the plague in 1665; for the first time she questioned the innocence of this perfect village.

She halted her rhythmic step just in time to admire the gorgeous cottage that stood quietly in front of her. She admired it for a short period of time in which she noted its perfect flowerbeds and the lovely creepers that inhabited the most perfect of walls and with impeccable thatching and window boxes. She soon realised on a moment's thought that this was her mum's lady, that perfect house.

She was, at first, frightened at the prospect of this woman who had made her mother, the most prominent, strong woman in her life, shiver but soon she mustered the courage to knock.

\* \* \*

I hadn't seen the bell, protruding from the wall, and as the woman dragged the door open and glared at me, I smiled sheepishly. She turned to me, the door still open just a crack.

"Hi?" I forced a smile and she glared again, daring me to speak.

"Hi?" I felt really stupid.

"Hello" she said icily.

"You look like someone I might have recognised." She saw my puzzled expression and sighed. "What do you want? Because I have no interest in whatever you plan to sell me." I had a sudden urge to take off, run away and never have to see this mad woman again; but she made me curious; what connection did she have with my mother, if any?

"I am Clara Swan". She flinched at my name.

"Hope Swan's daughter?"

"Well," she said uncertainly, "You had better come inside then." I questioned my ability to trust this woman, and immediately my mind replayed the moment my mother had talked about her; she was clearly of importance to mum and I decided to take this old lady up on her offer against my better judgement.

The inside of her house was different from what I had imagined, I thought she would have had scarce furnishing and grew lace to cover everything but her house was warm, it felt like coming home. It smelt distinctly of cooking, nothing specific, just cooking; it had deep, strong, warm colours and filling every inch, a wide variety of objects, littered everywhere giving the impression of chaos, but not in a bad way.

She led me through into the small, comfortable kitchen and bade me to sit. She busied herself making tea and I sat, daydreaming. She returned with a tray in her hands, having whipped up a cream tea within minutes.

She sat with me and I passed her the note; she read it intently while I wondered whether or not it would be rude to start, I was hungry and tired and I wanted to be at home in bed and I started wondering why I was here at all.

“So you *are* her daughter then?!” she said with a hint of surprise. ‘No,’ I thought, ‘I am impersonating her so I can abduct a disdainful, irritating woman like you’, but I decided to uphold my dignity and I simply said, “Yes, yes, I am” but I guess I wounded rather irritated because she apologised immediately. But even with this new found warmth I still felt a little edgy around her, like she was hiding something. She sat back in her chair and gazed intently at me for what seemed like hours. Finally she said, “Well, if this is true, then I am going to have to tell you from the beginning.”

I shook my head and she considered my confusion.

“No” she said, deciding, “I will tell you and then you’ll understand, from the beginning.

And so she started.

#### 1664 August – 1664 October

They were to be married in late August, on the day of one-and-thirty, so as to, hopefully, enjoy the warm summer that was to be. However, a year till the day of joy, Oliver was summoned to return to London as a matter of great significance for his business. He was to stay in the capital for up to 1 and 10 months of such before the couple were wed. All was going in swift and short time when the first news of the plague struck in the sudden receipt of a parcel.

It was the most glorious morning, the most beautiful of days, the day that Clara was handed the parcel that would seal her fate. She had woken to the bird song of a nightingale, a forlorn and lost tune, she whistled with it, harmonizing, creating a desolate melody; it was the wedding cloth, and she was all alone.

Clara was in turmoil; oh, how she needed to see him comfortable and well, but to endanger her village?

However, by the gift of God, Oliver was miraculously replaced, on the king’s personal order, a consequence of his service to him, and along with parliament he joined the city of Oxford. However, as of this replacement he was not able to be received before the day of five-and-twenty August, problematically near to the day of wed.

August 1665  
Eyam

*Dearest Clara,*

*I do hope I find you in good health, little trouble be there in Eyam.*

*If my apologies may be accepted I express my most sincere, tis all in aid our comfort. I stay here, till the next turn of summer for our glorious day of wed all but a year away. Lord, how will I wait.*

*It is a fault of our dear backward cousin as he is unable to deal with the complications of replacement and our service to our great king is needed in the utmost at these times.*

*London is in current turmoil and little authority remains – courtesy of our recent parliament. However, business is doing wonderfully well and I am in hope of our dearest backward cousin soon to be able to take ownership and so I will return to you my darling in success as soon as the chance may arrive.*

*The merciless disease destroying our capital has taken in on the 20<sup>th</sup> year in its cycle and has again taken hold so the sooner I am to return the more likely I will stay in good health. The first areas to be stricken with the curse are believed to be the dock areas just outside London, and the parish of St Giles in the Fields. Two suspicious deaths have been recorded in St Giles parish in December and another in February. These have not appeared as plague deaths on the Bills of Mortality, so no control measures have been taken by the authorities, but the mortality rate in London has been increasing alarmingly. By the end of last month only four plague deaths had been recorded, two in the parish of St Giles, but total deaths per week have risen from around 290 to 398 so much rumours have been passed but I am yet to be swayed in my suspicions.*

*Again, hope all is well and please do send any late news of the parish to my rooms.*

*Godspeed,  
Oliver Garland.*

She started crying now; the tears streaked her face as she ran to hide them, not tears, not again. He had sent the letter and but three days passed but already the paper was wet with tears. He was going to die, die of that dreadful disease even under the protection of the crown, for nowhere was safe, nowhere was clean.

He was going to die just when they were to have their beginning.

And the worst was yet to arrive.

#### 1665 September – 1666 August

The cloth that Oliver sent for Clara was received with the small letter – cloth of the latest of fashions, cloth such as silk and linen, just as the ladies of fashion were to wear. The materials had been sent on to the tailor's new-found assistant, Mr Viccars. They were to be dried (as they had been found to be dampened on the journey), cleaned, dyed and sewn to suit the style of the fashion of the ladies' dresses. As yet they were set by the fire's warmth but Mr Viccar's health deteriorated with despairing instance as he had begun to treat the cloth and so little else had been done. The apothecary could not give a diagnosis and telling Mr Viccars to rest, left. However within a week 3 more previously healthy people perished and rumours were passed – the plague in Eyam?

The air was dirty and thick, the skin clammy and flea-ridden, the bed; a stench of repulsive death; the latest victim's circumstances. Mr Nightingale had had his suspicions from the beginnings of the cases, however little could be proven; but now?

His wife and daughters were his top priorities as they bore the most love from him and he was already urging them to move but his steadfast wife and likewise daughters would not hear of it. He had discussed with the rector, Mopsson, as he had recently given leave of his two sons to an aunt in a village little under five-and-fifty miles far; but this case of the disease had left him with the deepest of emptiness and a feeling of helplessness that made him even surer of his resolve to save his loved ones; but he would not leave – he had stood by this village his entire life, leaving just a handful of

times to venture to the local villages for a market or celebration but not further than their valley, never; and he had no intentions to leave now.

However, as a dark, long, frostbitten winter wound its way into Eyam, the deaths decreased and Christmas was to proceed as usual. Church services excelled with the prized choir and in the glorified building little was there talk of the plague.

Christmas day passed followed by swift festivities and all was good and well; in the glorious month of May as less a number as 2 were said to have perished, but all hope collapsed in the dreaded month of June, when record numbers were recorded.

In early summer it was the await of her dearest that kept Clara awake in the late hours of the evening, whether he would be in good health and if the ordeal had been survived by their frail cousin, whom the future of their livelihoods depended upon.

The disease was not of equal importance until the day of two-and-twenty August. This was the day that was to be the time for Mr Nightingale's children and wife to leave. However Clara made it her resolve never to go and she would not be swayed from her opinion, not even by her own father. The carriage soon came and went, taking all five of her sisters, and her mother to be soon to follow. However the day was still not at an end as her father was now due to attend a vital meeting of the wise in the village where the details, cures and things that could prevent the plague were to be discussed. She followed him to the nearest possible degree and then stood by as she watched him enter the building. She hid and waited until the villagers had been permitted to enter the hall and then she followed, trying her utmost to be discreet.

She caught the thoughts of conducting outdoor church services to prevent the spread of the disease and all families to bury their own dead; but it was then she heard the thought of quarantine, a thought that would bring about their deaths; a decision that would kill them all. But then, if they left the monstrosity to take course, it would sacrifice every soul in this side of the country, everyone they loved.

The quarantine was put in place; she would never see Oliver again.

She cried that night, again. She cried for what would have been and what wasn't; she wrote him a letter to tell him to give up, to leave, to care of himself and never, ever to look back; the paper was stained with tears.

#### 1666 August – 1666 September

He had thought of what to say over and over, he still couldn't decide whether to take her or to stay.

He had, obviously, hurried proceedings, even against the king's wishes, to reach her, once the news of the plague in Eyam had found his doorstep, but even so he had still not been able to leave until the day he was to receive the letter; he had left two minutes before it was to arrive. He had sat in the carriage for ten hours and he still had not nearly arrived. He sat shaking his knee in a manic, obsessive manner until he was in view of the gorgeous thatched cottages soon to be his home. He reached the outer forest; take the shortest path, he had thought. But then he heard a strangled cry from behind.

"Oliver, don't!" it called, "Please don't! If you ever loved me you would not enter this cursed village, please!"

He heard a sob then the thud of bare feet running on earth.

“Wait!” he choked. Did this mean she did not love him?

“Wait!” He ran for the gates. “Clara, wait!”. He heard the thud of feet slowly halt and a rustle of the bushes around him; she called out again and warned him repeatedly, he stood in awe at his previous hope and their derelict situation her, now. She told him to leave, he laughed at that; she thought he would just go, just like that? No, she had known him too well to assume that, something must be incredibly wrong. “You know, I told you in previous, Oliver, why did you not heed my word? Why did you not listen? Why did you not care?” He stood, his face a picture of horror and shock. She started, a little more tentative this time, “Oliver? You got my letter, there is a quarantine, Oliver, we can never see one another ever again, ever!” He heard another sob and an uncertain step; he leaned closer towards her voice. “Never.” The running began again and she was gone, her tears lost in the wind.

He stopped at the iron wrought gates to compose himself; here had had to be proper, here he had to play the part if ever he was to see Clara again.

The Earl of Devonshire, his great, great uncle, his distant relative, was bound to him by a blood tie and he could not refuse Oliver’s pleas, even if it was to his greatest discontent but, as luck had it, the Earl was more than pleased to be of assistance and relished in Oliver’s need. Oliver gained residence of the Earl’s hall and on the instance of the acceptance he brought to attention Eyam’s direct pleas for food and other necessary resources to be placed at one of the boundary stones, the stones that separated Oliver from his love. The Earl instantly supported Oliver’s design and immediately decided to fund his plan for his dearest Eyam. After proposing his design, supposing his supporter’s funds, Oliver set to buying the direct supplies and to find an effective way of communicating to Clara. A note in her family’s food was decided and such was done in that first of many weeks in correspondence.

He had guessed her intentions to perfection and, as he had relied on, she arrived as the sun was to rise and collected her basket of the freshest food and the best preventatives; with a beautiful smile on her face that would have lifted any heart that saw the wonder. When the note was seen she flinched with a cascade of emotions changing her face until she looked up and Oliver was forced to go.

They continued their correspondence week after week; it was the highlight of their lives, those letters and hiding, waiting to see their beaming faces but always still feeling the most empty, hollow and raw feeling inside, that was the pain of not being able to know of each other’s existence other than in ink.

This vital correspondence continued right through until autumn, when they decided to meet.

They met at the old miners’ cave in the peaks and sat, in each other’s arms, silent. They had primitive conversation but usually they were there to enjoy each other’s company. They met like this every five days until the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, when Clara did not come. Oliver was wrought with worry and came back every day for a month, until eventually his trials were given worth; he spied a laborious figure, a lady, faltering up the slope; he ran down to her with the design of, whoever she was, asking after Clara.

However, when he reached the lady, it was Clara, Clara in full glory with a bulging stomach. "I am four months with your child" she whispered and he danced for joy.

#### 1666 September – 1666 December

He didn't arrive, just once but from that Clara knew she would never see him again. She could feel the dread wash over her, the awful feeling when your life flashes before you when you are faced with death and you know the inevitable. She would not be able to live without him, and she knew it but she could see no other way; she had to stop her selfishness.

She had had to drag herself from her dream that morning, into the nightmare she was really living, her life. She had come today to say goodbye, for the last time and she knew she would never be able to face herself again if she returned; there was no point wasting his life too. She turned back to her babe; it wept in the wicker basket as if it was to know of its inescapable fate.

That night the babe began to thrash in its cradle, moan and gasp then pull at its hair in a feverish manner; the darling had barely lived and now it was to die. The buboes appeared in the next 5 days and the darling lay, still as a corpse hardly daring to breathe of pain, Clara dying with it, inside, every day. Its breaths came as gasps now and its eyes were seemed to never open again, and the house was silent, mourning, of their dying babe. It lived another 5 nights before the plague had run its course; it was a fighter, and it would *never* have died.

She lived in a small bubble after that, venturing out of her house only for church and the necessary supplies, long, long after anyone would wait to see her and, when she and the babe would not be susceptible to the disease. It would have died by midnight or so the wise woman said.

They each lived like this, in a lonesome seclusion until the day Eyam was declared free of the curse, the plague village no more.

Oliver had been lost to the world those long labours winter months; he would be up there every day from dawn till dusk waiting, waiting for his dear love to come. He heard the bell toll almost daily for 2 months, he counted down all the residents he knew; was it Clara today, tomorrow? There was no certainty, no basis, no meaning to his life those days spent in the cove, those dark, shadowy days.

Then suddenly there was light in his darkness, hope in his despair, stars in his sky, love in his empty heart, love that filled it to overflowing, for there came a figure, a figure up the slope. He ran, tearing down the rocks, shouting, screaming her name, she was here!

But alas the figure was but a memory, but a madman's heart leading his mind, all but a picture. He wept.

The church bell tolled glorious in its freedom, not once, not twice, nor thrice did its golden music float through the fresh spring air; no, undreds if not thousands of times did the notes cleanse the minds. Deaths? No, live, lives, countless hope and glory, singing in the air, love floating in the breeze. Yes, they were free.

The crowds of longing relatives and friends thronged at the opening of the barriers between them and their loved ones, no such joy could be said, but let us not forget the lost ones who had not lived to tell their tale; but let us thank our dear Lord for sparing Clara and her babe. But still Oliver did not find them that day or the next.

Both were presumed dead in their household.

He decided, on the third day, to wait upon her household and express his deepest grievances. It was however little known that Clara was just scared, scared of Oliver, whom she had supposed to have run off with a lady of higher privileges, or just forgotten her. So when he arrived at her room to see her alive and well he was succumbed by happiness and his dearest daughter, later named Hope, for she was their hope and their dreams.

#### Hope – 2004

And so it was that the woman finished and turned to me with sincere eyes. “So now you understand; your mother’s name is Hope, is it not?”

Yeah, yeah, it is. I looked at her and she looked back imploring whether I had understood.

“The name has been passed through our family, once every generation for 350 years exactly; now one of your children is expected to bear the name, this is what your mother wanted me to tell you. And just to add to your confusion; my name is Clara Swan and I am your grandmother, my love.”