THE MISSES PRIM

By early 1925, the three Prim sisters had been born in the Manor House in Cherry Lane Village in England roughly two years apart. They had a governess called Miss Petticoat. The Coke family had occupied the Manor House for generations, and Sir Walter Coke was the sister's father, and Lady Amelia their mother. The Manor House had a large farm where pigs, horses and sheep were bred and sold. The Steward was responsible for everything about it. His name was Mr Brown. A couple of generations ago, the incumbent Coke had married an American heiress, who had taken great pleasure in throwing out all the furniture and fittings, removing layers of wallpaper – of course not by herself. She only chose the lovely, fashionable items. Then she started on the garden, which was just a large area left to nature, which admittedly, was covered with wildflowers in summer. Thanks to her, a sweeping driveway lined with chestnut trees led to the road in Cherry Lane Village, and an elegant garden with a walled kitchen garden, a summerhouse, walks lined with masses of flowers opening into pavilions with fountains and statues, and secluded seating was created. The Manor House certainly owed a lot to her, and her impeccable style.

The Manor House was divided into three stories: the lower ground floor, reserved for the cook, Mrs Eatwell, and her staff, the Butler, Mr James, the valets and the housekeeper, Mrs Jones. The maids and the dresser of the incumbent lady of the Manor were on the top floor. The dresser became her

confidante. This floor was reached by a private staircase to the kitchen.

The family's living quarters were on the middle floor, they were quite sumptuous. The girls' wing was separated from that of their parents. The girls of the Manor and stayed there until they married suitable young men or ran away as some had done in the past. Miss Petticoat bossed the maids, taught the girls how to embroider, and engaged tutors who taught them how to sing, dance and play the piano. Miss Petticoat taught them the three nevers: never answer the front door, never go to the kitchen, and never visit their parents except for an hour before dinner when they were at home.

The girls had no friends, but they had each other, and a strong bond existed between them. Every Saturday they walked into the village with Miss Petticoat, watching the village children having fun in their gardens or shopping by themselves. "Hello!" they shouted, "come and play with us!" "Don't answer them," said Miss Petticoat, "your parents would be very angry." "I wish we could!" exclaimed Rose. "We are nearly at the Sweet Shop, and you have sixpence each to buy sweets for the week" said Miss Petticoat. They loved the Sweet Shop and took their time choosing sweets from large bottles that stood on shelves around the wall. What a mixture they had, but small chocolates were their favourites. Then they walked to the Fancy Cake Tearoom which had many delicious cakes on offer. "I love Saturdays," Violet said. During the day, in

breaks from their lessons, the sisters played in the garden. On Saturdays they wandered around the farm, amongst the geese, petting the horses, and cuddling newborn pigs and lambs. As soon as they were old enough, they learnt to ride, and they each had their own pony. When they were ten, they were given a horse.

On Sundays, the family went to the ancient Anglican Church on the Manor's property. The girls sat with their parents in the first boxed seat. It was a long service. Afterwards, the family were the first to leave, and greeted their tenants genially. The girls were not allowed to speak to the tenants' children. However, they looked forward to Saturdays which they spent on the Manor farm with their parents. When the girls turned three, they were given a pony, and taught to ride. Rose's pony was black and called Beauty, Peonie's pony was brown and called Tripper, and Violet's pony was also brown and was called Flower. The stable lad taught them how to groom their ponies. At lunchtime, Mrs Eatwell came with a delicious picnic lunch, and they all sat under an ancient oak tree and enjoyed it. In winter, when it was not raining or snowing, the girls spent the morning riding their ponies over the fields beyond the farm with their parents. "I love summer!" exclaimed Rose, and they all agreed.

Mama had a sister, so she was the girls' aunt, and they called her Aunt Arabella. It was May, and the Manor House family and Miss Petticoat were spending the month with Aunt Arabela and Uncle John Ashworth. They, too, had three

children about the same age as their girl cousins, a sweet girl called Belinda who was blonde with blue eyes, like their Prim cousins, and two naughty boys, Patrick and Peter, who had brown eyes and hair. Aunt Arabella lived in a beautiful row of apartments called Park Crecent. It had been designed by a famous architect called John Nash. There were sixty-seven apartments each three stories high and facing Regent's Park with its wonderful gardens and tearoom. The family reached it by walking across a large field or down to the entrance on a busy road. "We are so lucky," said Patrick. "Our apartment has a large garden at the back leading down to a canal where we have a boathouse a and landing station. There are only eight other apartments like ours!"

"My dad doesn't have to work!" Peter informed the cousins. He inherited a fortune from one of his aunts who had no children!" Once, every year, the Prim family and Miss Petticoat spent a month in London in the spring, and in July their cousins, family and governess, Miss Scott, stayed with them at the Manor House. Aunt Arabella only had two Nevers: never go out of the front door, and never enter the servants' quarters!

The two Papas belonged to the Pall Mall Gentlemen's Club. Ladies could not join, and even servants were all male. Quite often in the mornings, the two Papas drove to the Club: they enjoyed a hearty breakfast, read the local newspapers, talked politics to their friends, and smoked a Cuban cigar.

“Let’s go down to the kitchen, and ask Cook if we can bake some pancakes, and small iced cakes,” suggested Belinda, “she may even teach us how to bake a rich fruit cake!” “Yes!” they all agreed. “And afterwards,” said Patrick, “we’ll play Hide and Seek – there are so many places to hide in the apartment and in the garden!”

While the Prims were in London, Aunt Arabella and Uncle John planned many fun places to visit. “Where do you think we are going today, Patrick?” he asked. “To the zoo,” he replied. “No,” said Peter, “I think we are going to Madame Tussaud’s!” “Quite right! Get ready we are going now.” said Uncle John. It was not far, and in fifteen minutes they were there. The queue at the entrance was not long, and, so, after a short wait to buy their tickets, they entered the Museum. “This is amazing!” exclaimed Rose. These wax figures look as if they are alive!” “Come and see this one,” said Peter, “it’s the oldest one in the Museum”. He showed them a lady in a long pink dress lying on a chaise lounge. “That’s not a wax figure” said Violet, “she’s breathing!” And, so, she was! “They put something in her chest to make it look as if she is breathing!” explained Patrick. They wandered around, and saw many famous people, including Napoleon, Queen Victoria and Albert, Joan of Arc, and Charles Dickens. “I want to see Jack the Ripper!” said Peter. “No, certainly not!” said Uncle John, “when you are older, we’ll visit the Chamber of Horrors!” After they left, they had a delicious lunch at a nearby hotel and walked back home.

The next day, Partick said to his cousins, “I’m going to ask if we can go with our governesses to the London Zoo. It’s right near us in Regent’s Park.” As soon as they were given permission, they ran downstairs, and asked Cook to pack them a picnic lunch. “We want chicken mayonnaise sandwiches!” said Belinda. “And ham sandwiches,” added Rose. “And big slices of chocolate cake!” said Peter. “And ginger-pop!” said Peonie. “And how about please?” asked Cook. “Pleeeeease?” they all begged in unison. An hour later, the excited children left the apartment with Miss Petticoat and Miss Scott carrying picnic baskets, and their mamas telling them to be good.

Miss Scott paid the admission fee, and they walked into the Zoo. “Monkeys first,” said Peter. The monkeys were in a large building. There were ropes hanging from the top, and monkeys were swinging from one to the next one. It was very noisy as the monkeys were chattering and screeching. Some were sitting on the floor, with other monkeys grooming them. “Oh! Look how sweet!” cried Violet, “I love the babies riding on their mother’s backs!” There was a man with a large box hung around his neck, filled with brown paper packets of peanuts. “A penny a packet,” he called, and the children each bought one. There were a lot of other visitors in the Monkey House, so the peanut man did very well. They wandered around in all the animal houses, and then they went to the open areas and saw lions, tigers, deer and elephants. Happy and tired, they walked out of the Zoo,

and into the big field near their apartment, sat on the grass under an ancient oak, and got stuck into their picnic.

One day, they went by bus to the centre of London, the children scrambling up to the top deck so they could get a better view while their parents sat on the lower deck. Miss Petticoat had been given the day off. “Thank you, Ma’am,” she said, “I think I will sit in the pavilion and read my book, it’s by Jane Austin and is called Emma.” Miss Scott said she would walk into the next village – it was about a mile away – and have lunch in the King Charles Pub. She loved their pork pies and cream tarts.

The families got off the bus at Trafalgar Square, and the children immediately climbed up onto the two majestic statues of reclining lions. “Put your hands down their throats!” yelled Peter. They jumped off, and the Prim girls stared at the huge Square, and up to Lord Nelson on top of a very tall column. “He’s the famous admiral who defeated Napoleon!” said Papa. “Who’s Napoleon?” asked Violet. “Ask Miss Petticoat tomorrow,” replied Mama. “Look at all the pidgins!” exclaimed Patrick. “Papa, please buy packets of peanuts for us?”

“I want to show you the beautiful Anglican church of St Martin’s in the Field. It’s over there,” said Aunt Arabella. They walked up the stairs to a large columned porch with descending stairs on the other side, and into the ancient church. It was beautiful with a magnificent blue stained-glass window at the far end. The organist was practising for

Sunday, and they all sat and listened. Back in Trafalgar Square, they climbed up the wide stairs, and entered the imposing National Art Gallery. “There are so many paintings here, that I will show you the one I love best,” said Aunt Arabella leading the way to a simply huge painting. The children stared at it in amazement. It was the size of two doors! “It’s a painting by Gerrit van Honthorst, a very famous painter,” explained Mama. The children stared at it. “It’s called Christ before the High Priest,” continued Mama. “It was when Christ Jesus was taken for trial for blasphemy before his crucifixion. Look at the High Priest sitting at a table with his arm resting on it and his finger pointing up, as if to ask, ‘Don’t you know?’ And Jesus, standing in front of him, looking at him in pity.” “What wonderful colours - reds and browns!” exclaimed Rose, who enjoyed painting. “I think it’s scary,” said Peter. “Look at those men staring in the background.” The Gallery was huge, there were different rooms devoted to different artists. They went into the Constable Room. “Wow!” exclaimed Violet, “they look just like home!” Feeling tired and hungry, they took a cab to the Savoy Hotel, and enjoyed a delicious lunch before returning to Park Crescent by bus.

One sunny day, Aunt Arabella said, “It’s just the day for a cruise on the Little Venice Canal, we can walk along the towpath as we have done before and get on the waterbus to sail down to Camdem Town. The waterbus was not very big, and the driver said, “Welcome aboard! I can leave early as the bus is full, and I won’t be able to stop at any stations

along the way!" He started the engine, and they passed their house. "This is beautiful!" exclaimed Violet, "all these trees overhanging the canal! I shall paint it when I get back." When the waterbus reached Camden Town, they all thanked the driver, and got off. Aunt Arabella bought them huge ice-cream cones, and they caught a bus home in time for a picnic lunch in the garden.

In July, the Ashworth family paid a return visit to the Manor House. It was a lovely time of the year, warm and sunny with fields full of flowers and beautiful country in which to ride. Aunt Amelia only had one never – never speak to the tenants' children after church. But that didn't apply when they were on the Manor House farm, and so great friendships were formed, and quite a large crowd had fun playing in fields, jumping over rocks in small rivers, and splashing water over each other. When they were tired and dirty, they sat under a large oak and their parents arrived, followed by Mrs Eatwell and servants carrying a most delicious cold lunch and lemonade after which they lay on blankets in the shade and slept.

One morning Uncle Walter said, "I am going to an auction of prize animals. Anyone like to come?" "Yes!" shouted the children. "We would prefer to stay here," said their mothers. "Too long, smelly and we have been there before!" "Get ready," said Uncle Walter, "the cars leave in five minutes!" It was not far to the auction. There were many cars and trucks parked outside the auction hall. They all trouped inside. "Yes! It is smelly," said Rose, pulling a face. Inside

there was a central circle enclosed with a fence. People were sitting on tiers in a ring around the circle. Luckily enough, there were seats in the front row for the family. An attendant came up to Sir Coke. “Here is your card, Sir,” he said. “You are number twenty.” “What’s that for Uncle Walter?” asked Patrick. “If I want any animal,” he replied, “when bidding begins, I hold up my card and say how much I will pay for that animal. Then other people can call out a higher figure, until no one calls out and the last bidder gets the animal.” A tall, stout man climbed up steps leading to a platform with a desk. He picked up a gavel and struck the desk twice. “Welcome to this live auction! May the best man win! Next week we will auction great grandfather’s furniture, and the following week great grandmother’s clothes, from her tiaras to her many petticoats, huge bloomers, and down to her toes! All these items will be on view the day before, and there will be no smell! Let’s start!” A huge bull was led into the ring and paraded about by a farmhand. The auctioneer started to speak. “Oh!” cried Rose, “whatever is he gabling about! I’ve never heard anything so fast!” Uncle Walter held up his card. “Fifty shillings!” he cried. Another man held up his card and cried, “one pound,” and so it went on until Uncle Walter bought the bull, also named Walter, for five pounds. “Don’t go near him on the farm!” he warned the children. All kinds of animals were auctioned, more bulls, cows, sheep, rams, geese, turkeys and chickens. “Come on,” said Uncle Walter, “there is a good inn nearby that serves delicious pies and cakes!”

The next week, at breakfast, Aunt Amelia said, “We are going to the city of Darrowton. It’s about 20 miles from here. “What do you think we shall see?” “The seaside!” answered Patrick. “A lovely palace!” answered Belinda. “A museum” said Rose hopefully. “No! you are wrong, you will have to wait and see!” said Aunt Amelia. On the way, they passed three pretty villages, and stopped at The Sweetest Sweets where Aunt Arabella bought two big bags of assorted chocolates, one for each car.

They arrived at Darrowton. It was a large and bustling city, and they turned off the main street, and drove into the surrounding countryside stopping in front of a huge, ruined building. “What’s this?” asked Peter as they tumbled out of the cars. “It’s a ruined monastery,” replied Uncle Walter. “Go and have a look, I will tell you about monasteries after that.” They went into the building. It was huge, and built of stones with very thick walls. The roof had completely disappeared, and they could see where windows and doors must have been. Sitting on the lawns surrounding the monastery, Uncle Walter began to speak, “Monasteries were built in the 600s in England. Many monks lived godly lives in the monasteries. They were founded to spread the Gospel in England. Monks copied beautiful verses from the Bible, and illustrated them with amazing pictures and lettering. I’ll take you to the museum in Darrowton to see them. Let’s get in the cars and go now.” The early Bibles were displayed in glass boxes. “Oh! How beautiful!” said Belinda. “I will try and copy this one when we get back,” said

Violet. “There’s a nice hotel nearby, said Aunt Amelia, and I’m hungry!” After a simply delicious lunch, they walked to St Mark’s Cathedral. It was simply beautiful. A guide took them on a tour. “The Cathedral was built in the 13th century,” she said.

“We will walk around it first and see the massive buttresses that holds this huge cathedral up, the wonderful entrance doors framed by sculptures of Jesus and figures from the Bible, and all the other sculptures on the building, especially the weird and funny gargoyles!” When the families got back to the Manor House, Uncle Walter asked the children what they liked best about the Cathedral. “The stained-glass windows!” said Patrick. “Some people were ignorant and there was no Bible for them to read, so the stained-glass windows taught them all the Bible stories from the Creation until Jesus Christ will come in glory!” said Peter. “Yes!” All the others agreed. And so, the July holidays passed very quickly, and lessons began with their governesses and tutors.

Years passed and the Coke girls now had crushes on the tenant boys. This was reciprocated. Papa and Mama were not charmed. Rosie and Douglas paired up, as did Peonie and Allan, and Violet and Benedict. Douglas Tenant planned to become a doctor, Benedict a minister, and Allan a vet. Then World War Two was declared between Britain and Nazi Germany, and 48 young men from the Cherry Lane Village were called up. The Tenant young men all proposed to the Coke young ladies and were joyfully accepted. A

special force's train arrived at the station to take them to training areas or straight to the War Front. As the young men leant out of the train's windows, the families standing on the platform waved goodbye – but when the train left, they burst into tears.

Every night they all sat around their radios, listening to Churchill speak. He was their hero. "We will fight them on the beaches, we will fight them on the seas, we will fight them on our land, and we will never surrender!" They bought newspapers, and saw him raising his fingers in the V for Victory sign. He gave them courage to fight, and to prevail. It took an enormous toll on Britain.

Of the 48 young men from the Cherry Lane Village, none returned, and there was much weeping. The Coke young ladies were broken hearted, and nothing could comfort them. They never married, carrying their love for their lovers until they died. Daily life went on. A memorial stone was erected in the centre of the village, and consecrated by the minister at a very sad ceremony. Papa Coke became very ill - too many cigars and died. A few years later Mama Coke died peacefully in her sleep, and the now middle-aged ladies inherited the Manor House and farm.

The Coke family had always been devout Christians, giving their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ at an early age, and supporting the village church with their tithes and with their service. Every evening at the Manor House, Sir Walter Coke called all the family and staff to come for a time of Bible

study and prayer. When his staff or their families were in difficulties or sickness he helped them, and he paid them generously, far above the going rate.

Rose, Peonie and Violet carried on this tradition, each leading the service for a week in turn. One morning while they were having tea in the garden, Rose said, “I keep thinking about all the wounded soldiers who returned. I know the badly wounded are cared for in homes run by the government, but others are living in their homes, and although receiving government grants are still a burden on their families. Have you any ideas how we could rise money to help them?” Violet replied, “I could sell my paintings – I have many – and I could also make pretty greeting and Christmas cards. Peonie said, “What if we built a tearoom in the walled garden, and served delicious teas and cakes, and sold jams, biscuits, cakes and Violet’s paintings and greeting cards, like other large estates do?” “Yes!” exclaimed Rose, “and charge a reasonable entrance fee, with free entry for children.” They were all very excited, and after a few months a charming tearoom had been built and was up and running. They employed teenaged girls from the village as waitresses and two cooks. The ladies were thrilled. Each year they made a large sum and were a blessing to the wounded soldiers they supported.

The sisters had a joint will. When they died in their eighties, they left the Manor House and farm to the National Trust so that it and other ancient buildings could be restored, keeping their heritage alive for posterity.