

PROLOGUE

1866

[I]

ON THE DAY of the tragedy, the boys of Windfield School had been confined to their rooms.

It was a hot Saturday in May, and they would normally have spent the afternoon on the south field, some playing cricket and others watching from the shady fringes of Bishop's Wood. But a crime had been committed. Six gold sovereigns had been stolen from the desk of Dr Offerton, the Latin master, and the whole school was under suspicion. All the boys were to be kept in until the thief was caught.

Micky Miranda sat at a table scarred with the initials of generations of bored schoolboys. In his hand was a government publication called *Equipment of Infantry*. The engravings of swords, muskets and rifles usually fascinated him, but he was too hot to concentrate. On the other side of the table his room-mate, Edward Pilaster, looked up from a Latin exercise book. He was copying out Micky's translation of a page from Plutarch, and now he pointed an inky finger and said: 'I can't read this word.'

Micky looked. 'Decapitated,' he said. 'It's the same word in Latin, *decapitare*.' Micky found Latin easy, perhaps because many of the words were similar in Spanish, which was his native language.

Edward's pen scratched on. Micky got up restlessly and went to the open window. There was no breeze. He looked wistfully across the stable yard to the woods. There was a shady swimming-hole in a disused quarry at the north end of Bishop's Wood. The water was cold and deep. . . .

'Let's go swimming,' he said suddenly.

'We can't,' Edward said.

'We could go out through the synagogue.' The

‘synagogue’ was the room next door, which was shared by three Jewish boys. Windfield School taught divinity with a light touch and was tolerant of religious differences, which was why it appealed to Jewish parents, to Edward’s Methodist family, and to Micky’s Catholic father. But, despite the school’s official attitude, Jewish boys came in for a certain amount of persecution. Micky went on: ‘We can go through their window and drop on to the wash-house roof, climb down the blind side of the stable and sneak into the woods.’

Edward looked scared. ‘It’s the Striper if you’re caught.’

The Striper was the ash cane wielded by the headmaster, Dr Poleson. The punishment for breaking detention was twelve agonizing strokes. Micky had been flogged once by Dr Poleson, for gambling, and he still shuddered when he thought of it. But the chance of getting caught was remote, and the idea of undressing and slipping naked into the pool was so immediate that he could almost feel the cold water on his sweaty skin.

He looked at his room-mate. Edward was not well liked at school: he was too lazy to be a good student, too clumsy to do well in games and too selfish to make many friends. Micky was the only friend he had, and he hated Micky to spend time with other boys. ‘I’ll see if Pilkington wants to go,’ Micky said, and he went to the door.

‘No, don’t do that,’ said Edward anxiously.

‘I don’t see why I shouldn’t,’ said Micky. ‘You’re too scared.’

‘I’m not scared,’ Edward said implausibly. ‘I’ve got to finish my Latin.’

‘Then finish it while I go swimming with Pilkington.’

Edward looked stubborn for a moment, then caved in. ‘All right, I’ll go,’ he said reluctantly.

Micky opened the door. There was a low rumble of noise

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from the rest of the house, but no masters to be seen in the corridor. He darted into the next room. Edward followed.

‘Hello, Hebrews,’ Micky said.

Two of the boys were playing cards at the table. They glanced up at him then continued their game without speaking. The third, Fatty Greenbourne, was eating a cake. His mother sent him food all the time. ‘Hello, you two,’ he said amiably. ‘Want some cake?’

‘By God, Greenbourne, you eat like a pig,’ Micky said.

Fatty shrugged and continued to tuck in to his cake. He suffered a good deal of mockery, being fat as well as Jewish, but none of it seemed to touch him. His father was said to be the richest man in the world, and perhaps that made him impervious to name-calling, Micky thought.

Micky went to the window, opened it and looked around. The stable yard was deserted. Fatty said: ‘What are you fellows doing?’

‘Going swimming,’ said Micky.

‘You’ll be flogged.’

Edward said plaintively: ‘I know.’

Micky sat on the windowsill, rolled over on to his stomach, wriggled backwards and then dropped the few inches on to the sloping roof of the wash-house. He thought he heard a slate crack, but the roof held his weight. He glanced up and saw Edward looking anxiously out. ‘Come on!’ Micky said. He scrambled down the roof and used a convenient drainpipe to ease himself to the ground. A minute later Edward landed beside him.

Micky peeked around the corner of the wash-house wall. There was no one in sight. Without further hesitation he darted across the stable yard and into the woods. He ran through the trees until he judged he was out of sight of the school buildings, then he stopped to rest. Edward came up beside him. ‘We did it!’ Micky said. ‘Nobody spotted us.’

‘We’ll probably be caught going back in,’ Edward said morosely.

Micky smiled at him. Edward was very English-looking, with straight fair hair and blue eyes and a big nose like a broad-bladed knife. He was a tall boy with wide shoulders, strong but uncoordinated. He had no sense of style, and wore his clothes awkwardly. He and Micky were the same age, sixteen, but in other ways they were very different: Micky had curly dark hair and dark eyes, and he was meticulous about his appearance, hating to be untidy or dirty. ‘Trust me, Pilaster,’ Micky said. ‘Don’t I always take care of you?’

Edward grinned, mollified. ‘All right, let’s go.’

They followed a barely discernible path through the wood. It was a little cooler under the leaves of the beech and elm trees, and Micky began to feel better. ‘What will you do this summer?’ he asked Edward.

‘We usually go to Scotland in August.’

‘Do your people have a shooting-box there?’ Micky had picked up the jargon of the English upper classes, and he knew that ‘shooting-box’ was the correct term even if the house in question was a fifty-room castle.

‘They rent a place,’ Edward replied. ‘But we don’t shoot over it. My father’s not a sportsman, you know.’

Micky heard a defensive note in Edward’s voice and pondered its significance. He knew that the English aristocracy liked to shoot birds in August and hunt foxes all winter. He also knew that aristocrats did not send their sons to this school. The fathers of Windfield boys were businessmen and engineers rather than earls and bishops, and such men did not have time to waste hunting and shooting. The Pilasters were bankers, and when Edward said ‘My father’s not a sportsman’ he was acknowledging that his family was not in the very highest rank of society.

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It amused Micky that Englishmen respected the idle more than people who worked. In his own country, respect was given neither to aimless nobles nor to hard-working businessmen. Micky's people respected nothing but power. If a man had the power to control others – to feed or starve them, imprison or free them, kill them or let them live – what more did he need?

'What about you?' Edward said. 'How will you spend the summer?'

Micky had wanted him to ask that. 'Here,' he said. 'At school.'

'You're not staying at school all through the vacation again?'

'I have to. I can't go home. It takes six weeks one way – I'd have to start back before I got there.'

'By Jove, that's hard.'

In fact Micky had no wish to go back. He loathed his home, and had done since his mother died. There were only men there now: his father, his older brother Paulo, some uncles and cousins, and four hundred cowboys. Papa was a hero to the men and a stranger to Micky: cold, unapproachable, impatient. But Micky's brother was the real problem. Paulo was stupid but strong. He hated Micky for being smarter, and he liked to humiliate his little brother. He never missed a chance to prove to everyone that Micky could not rope steers or break horses or shoot a snake through the head. His favourite trick was to scare Micky's horse so it would bolt, and Micky would have to shut his eyes tight and cling on, scared to death, while the horse charged madly across the pampas until it exhausted itself. No, Micky did not want to go home for the vacation. But he did not want to remain at school, either. What he really wanted was to be invited to spend the summer with the Pilaster family.

Edward did not immediately suggest this, however, and Micky let the subject drop. He felt sure it would come up again.

They clambered over a decaying picket fence and walked up a low hill. As they breasted the rise they came upon the swimming-hole. The chiselled sides of the quarry were steep, but agile boys could find a way to scramble down. At the bottom was a deep pool of murky green water that contained toads, frogs and the occasional water-snake.

To Micky's surprise, there were also three boys in it.

He narrowed his eyes against the sunlight glinting off the surface and peered at the naked figures. All three were in the lower fourth at Windfield.

The mop of carrot-coloured hair belonged to Antonio Silva, who despite his colouring was a compatriot of Micky's. Tonio's father did not have as much land as Micky's, but the Silvas lived in the capital and had influential friends. Like Micky, Tonio could not go home in the vacations, but he was lucky enough to have friends at the Cordovan Ministry in London, so he did not have to stay at the school all summer.

The second boy was Hugh Pilaster, a cousin of Edward's. There was no resemblance between the cousins: Hugh had black hair and small, neat features, and he usually wore an impish grin. Edward resented Hugh for being a good scholar and making Edward look like the dunce of the family.

The other was Peter Middleton, a rather timid boy who attached himself to the more confident Hugh. All three had white, hairless thirteen-year-old bodies with thin arms and legs.

Then Micky saw a fourth boy. He was swimming on his own at the far end of the pool. He was older than the other

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three and did not seem to be with them. Micky could not see his face well enough to identify him.

Edward was grinning evilly. He had seen an opportunity to make mischief. He put his finger to his lips in a hushing gesture then started down the side of the quarry. Micky followed.

They reached the ledge where the small boys had left their clothes. Tonio and Hugh were diving underneath, investigating something, while Peter swam quietly up and down on his own. Peter was the first to spot the newcomers. 'Oh, no,' he said.

'Well, well,' said Edward. 'You boys are breaking bounds, aren't you?'

Hugh Pilaster noticed his cousin then, and shouted back: 'So are you!'

'You'd better go back, before you're caught,' Edward said. He picked up a pair of trousers from the ground. 'But don't get your clothes wet, or everyone will know where you've been.' Then he threw the trousers into the middle of the pool and cackled with laughter.

'You cad!' Peter yelled as he made a grab for the floating trousers.

Micky smiled, amused.

Edward picked up a boot and threw it in.

The small boys began to panic. Edward picked up another pair of trousers and threw them in. It was hilarious to see the three victims yelling and diving for their clothes, and Micky started to laugh.

As Edward continued to throw boots and clothes into the water, Hugh Pilaster scrambled out. Micky expected him to make his escape, but unexpectedly he ran straight at Edward. Before Edward could turn around, Hugh gave him a mighty shove. Although Edward was much bigger,

he was caught off balance. He staggered on the ledge then toppled over and fell into the pool with a terrific splash.

It was done in a twinkling, and Hugh snatched up an armful of clothes and went up the quarry side like a monkey. Peter and Tonio shrieked with mocking laughter.

Micky chased Hugh a short way but realized he could not hope to catch the smaller, nimbler boy. Turning back, he looked to see whether Edward was all right. He need not have worried. Edward had surfaced. He got hold of Peter Middleton and started ducking the boy's head again and again, punishing him for that mocking laugh.

Tonio swam away and reached the edge of the pool, clutching a bundle of sodden clothing. He turned to look back. 'Leave him alone, you big ape!' he yelled at Edward. Tonio had always been reckless and now Micky wondered what he would do next. Tonio went further along the side, then turned again with a stone in his hand. Micky yelled a warning to Edward, but it was too late. Tonio threw the stone with surprising accuracy and hit Edward on the head. A bright splash of blood appeared on his brow.

Edward gave a roar of pain and, leaving Peter, struck out across the pool after Tonio.

[II]

HUGH RACED naked through the wood towards the school, clutching what remained of his clothes, trying to ignore the pain of his bare feet on the rough ground. Coming to a place where the path was crossed by another, he dodged to the left, ran on a little way, then dived into the bushes and hid.

He waited, trying to calm his hoarse breathing and listen. His cousin Edward and Edward's crony, Micky

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Miranda, were the worst beasts in the entire school: slackers, bad sports and bullies. The only thing to do was to keep out of their way. But he felt sure Edward would come after him. Edward had always hated Hugh.

Their fathers had quarrelled, too. Hugh's father, Toby, had taken his capital out of the family business and started his own enterprise, trading in dyes for the textile industry. Even at thirteen Hugh knew that the worst crime in the Pilaster family was to take your capital out of the bank. Edward's father, Joseph, had never forgiven his brother Toby.

Hugh wondered what had happened to his friends. There had been four of them in the pool before Micky and Edward turned up: Tonio, Peter and Hugh had been splashing about on one side of the pool, and an older boy, Albert Cammel, had been swimming alone at the far end.

Tonio was normally brave to the point of recklessness, but he was terrified of Micky Miranda. They came from the same place, a South American country called Cordova, and Tonio said that Micky's family were powerful and cruel. Hugh did not really understand what that meant, but the effect was striking: Tonio might cheek the other fifth-formers but he was always polite, even subservient, to Micky.

Peter would be scared out of his wits: he was frightened of his own shadow. Hugh hoped he had got away from the bullies.

Albert Cammel, nicknamed Hump, had not been with Hugh and friends, and he had left his clothes in a different place, so he had probably escaped.

Hugh too had escaped, but he was not yet out of trouble. He had lost his underclothes, socks and boots. He would have to sneak into school in his soaking wet shirt and trousers and hope he would not be seen by a master or one

of the senior boys. He groaned aloud at the thought. Why do things like this always happen to me? he asked himself miserably.

He had been in and out of trouble ever since he came to Windfield eighteen months ago. He had no trouble studying: he worked hard and came top of his class in every test. But the petty rules irritated him beyond reason. Ordered to go to bed every night at a quarter to ten, he always had some compelling reason for staying up until a quarter past. He found forbidden places tantalizing, and was irresistibly drawn to explore the rectory garden, the headmaster's orchard, the coal-hole and the beer cellar. He ran when he should have walked, read when he was supposed to go to sleep, and talked during prayers. And he always ended up like this, guilty and scared, wondering why he let himself in for so much grief.

The wood was silent for several minutes while he reflected gloomily on his destiny, wondering whether he would end up an outcast from society, or even a criminal, thrown in jail or transported to Australia in chains or hanged.

At last he decided that Edward was not coming after him. He stood up and pulled on his wet trousers and shirt. Then he heard someone crying.

Cautiously, he peeped out – and saw Tonio's shock of carrot-coloured hair. His friend was walking slowly along the path, naked, wet, carrying his clothes and sobbing.

'What happened?' Hugh asked. 'Where's Peter?'

Tonio suddenly became fierce. 'I'll never tell, never!' he said. 'They'll kill me.'

'All right, don't tell me,' Hugh said. As always, Tonio was terrified of Micky: whatever had happened, Tonio would keep quiet about it. 'You'd better get dressed,' Hugh said practically.

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Tonio looked blankly at the bundle of sodden garments in his arms. He seemed too shocked to sort them out. Hugh took them from him. He had boots and trousers and one sock, but no shirt. Hugh helped him put on what he had, then they walked towards the school.

Tonio stopped crying, though he still looked badly shaken. Hugh hoped those bullies hadn't done something really nasty to Peter. But he had to think of saving his own skin now. 'If we can get into the dormitory, we can put on fresh clothes and our spare boots,' he said, planning ahead. 'Then as soon as the detention is lifted we can walk into town and buy new clothes on credit at Baxted's.'

Tonio nodded. 'All right,' he said dully.

As they wound their way through the trees, Hugh wondered again why Tonio was so disturbed. After all, bullying was nothing new at Windfield. What had happened back there at the pool after Hugh had escaped? But Tonio said nothing more about it all the way back.

The school was a collection of six buildings that had once been the hub of a large farm, and their dormitory was in the old dairy near the chapel. To get there they had to go over a wall and cross the fives court. They climbed the wall and peeped over. The courtyard was deserted, as Hugh had expected, but all the same he hesitated. The thought of the Striper whipping his behind made him cringe. But there was no alternative. He had to get back into school and put on dry clothes.

'All clear,' he hissed. 'Off we go!'

They jumped over the wall together and sprinted across the court to the cool shade of the stone-built chapel. So far, so good. Then they crept around the east end, staying close to the wall. Next there was a short dash across the drive and into their building. Hugh paused. There was no one in sight. 'Now!' he said.

The two boys ran across the road. Then, as they reached the door, disaster struck. A familiar, authoritative voice rang out: 'Pilaster Minor! Is that you?' And Hugh knew that the game was up.

His heart sank. He stopped and turned. Dr Offerton had chosen that very moment to come out of the chapel, and now stood in the shadow of the porch, a tall, dyspeptic figure in a college gown and mortar-board hat. Hugh stifled a groan. Dr Offerton, whose money had been stolen, was the least likely of all the masters to show mercy. It would be the Striper. The muscles of his bottom clenched involuntarily.

'Come here, Pilaster,' Dr Offerton said.

Hugh shuffled over to him, with Tonio following behind. Why do I take such risks? Hugh thought in despair.

'Headmaster's study, right away,' said Dr Offerton.

'Yes, sir,' Hugh said miserably. It was getting worse and worse. When the head saw how he was dressed he would probably be sacked from the school. And how would he explain it to his mother?

'Off you go!' the master said impatiently.

The two boys turned away, but Dr Offerton said: 'Not you, Silva.'

Hugh and Tonio exchanged a quick mystified look. Why should Hugh be punished and not Tonio? But they could not question orders, and Tonio escaped into the dormitory while Hugh made for the head's house.

He could feel the Striper already. He knew he would cry, and that was even worse than the pain, for at the age of thirteen he felt he was too old to cry.

The head's house was on the far side of the school compound, and Hugh walked very slowly, but he got there all too soon, and the maid opened the door a second after he rang.

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He met Dr Poleson in the hall. The headmaster was a bald man with a bulldog's face, but for some reason he did not look as thunderously angry as he should have. Instead of demanding to know why Hugh was out of his room *and* dripping wet, he simply opened the study door and said quietly: 'In here, young Pilaster.' No doubt he was saving his rage for the flogging. Hugh went in with his heart pounding.

He was astonished to see his mother sitting there.

Worse yet, she was weeping.

'I only went swimming!' Hugh blurted out.

The door closed behind him and he realized the head had not followed him in.

Then he began to understand that this had nothing to do with his breaking detention and going swimming, and losing his clothing, and being found half-naked.

He had a dreadful feeling it was much worse than that.

'Mother, what is it?' he said. 'Why have you come?'

'Oh, Hugh,' she sobbed, 'your father's dead.'

[III]

SATURDAY WAS the best day of the week for Maisie Robinson. On Saturday Papa got paid. Tonight there would be meat for supper, and new bread.

She sat on the front doorstep with her brother Danny, waiting for Papa to come home from work. Danny was thirteen, two years older than Maisie, and she thought he was wonderful, even though he was not always kind to her.

The house was one of a row of damp, airless dwellings in the dockland neighbourhood of a small town on the north-east coast of England. It belonged to Mrs MacNeil, a widow. She lived in the front room downstairs. The

Robinsons lived in the back room and another family lived upstairs. When it was time for Papa to arrive home, Mrs MacNeil would be out on the doorstep, waiting to collect the rent.

Maisie was hungry. Yesterday she had begged some broken bones from the butcher and Papa had bought a turnip and made a stew, and that was the last meal she had had. But today was Saturday!

She tried not to think about supper, for it made the pain in her stomach worse. To take her mind off food she said to Danny: 'Papa swore this morning.'

'What did he say?'

'He said Mrs MacNeil is a *paskudniak*.'

Danny giggled. The word meant shitbag. Both children spoke English fluently after a year in the new country, but they remembered their Yiddish.

Their name was not really Robinson, it was Rabinowicz. Mrs MacNeil had hated them ever since she discovered they were Jews. She had never met a Jew before and when she rented them the room she thought they were French. There were no other Jews in this town. The Robinsons had never intended to come here: they had paid for passage to a place called Manchester, where there were lots of Jews, and the ship's captain had told them this was Manchester, but he had cheated them. When they discovered they were in the wrong place, Papa said they would save up enough money to move to Manchester; but then Mama had fallen ill. She was still ill, and they were still here.

Papa worked on the waterfront, in a high warehouse with the words 'Tobias Pilaster and Co' in big letters over the gate. Maisie often wondered who Co was. Papa worked as a clerk, keeping records of the barrels of dyes that came in and out of the building. He was a careful man, a taker of notes and a maker of lists. Mama was the reverse. She had

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always been the daring one. It was Mama who wanted to come to England. Mama loved to make parties, go on trips, meet new people, dress up and play games. That was why Papa loved her so much, Maisie thought: because she was something he could never be.

She was not spirited any more. She lay all day on the old mattress, drifting in and out of sleep, her pale face shiny with sweat, her breath hot and odorous. The doctor had said she needed building up, with plenty of fresh eggs and cream, and beef every day; and then Papa had paid him with the money for that night's dinner. But now Maisie felt guilty every time she ate, knowing that she was taking food that might save her mother's life.

Maisie and Danny had learned to steal. On market day they would go into the centre of town and pilfer potatoes and apples from the stalls in the square. The traders were sharp-eyed but every now and again they would be distracted by something – an argument over change, a dog fight, a drunk – and the children would grab what they could. When their luck was in, they would meet a rich kid their own age; then they would set on him and rob him. Such children often had an orange or a bag of sweets in their pockets as well as a few pennies. Maisie was afraid of being caught because she knew Mama would be so ashamed, but she was hungry too.

She looked up and saw some men coming along the street in a knot. She wondered who they were. It was still a little too early for the dock workers to be coming home. They were talking angrily, waving their arms and shaking their fists. As they came closer she recognized Mr Ross, who lived upstairs and worked with Papa at Pilasters. Why was he not at work? Had they been sacked? He looked angry enough for that. He was red in the face and swearing, talking about stupid gits, lousy bleeders and lying bastards.

When the group drew level with the house Mr Ross left them abruptly and stomped inside, and Maisie and Danny had to dive out of the way to avoid his hobnailed boots.

When Maisie looked up again she saw Papa. A thin man with a black beard and soft brown eyes, he was following the others at a distance, walking with his head bowed; and he looked so dejected and hopeless that Maisie wanted to cry. ‘Papa, what’s happened?’ she said. ‘Why are you home early?’

‘Come inside,’ he said, his voice so low that Maisie could only just hear.

The two children followed him into the back of the house. He knelt by the mattress and kissed Mama’s lips. She woke up and smiled at him. He did not smile back. ‘The firm’s bust,’ he said, speaking Yiddish. ‘Toby Pilaster went bankrupt.’

Maisie was not sure what that meant but Papa’s tone of voice made it sound like a disaster. She shot a look at Danny: he shrugged. He did not understand it either.

‘But why?’ Mama said.

‘There’s been a financial crash,’ Papa said. ‘A big bank in London failed yesterday.’

Mama frowned, struggling to concentrate. ‘But this isn’t London,’ she said. ‘What’s London to us?’

‘The details I don’t know.’

‘So you’ve got no work?’

‘No work, and no pay.’

‘But today they’ve paid you.’

Papa bowed his head. ‘No, they didn’t pay us.’

Maisie looked at Danny again. This they understood. No money meant no food for any of them. Danny looked scared. Maisie wanted to cry.

‘They must pay you,’ Mama whispered. ‘You worked all week, they have to pay you.’

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‘They’ve no money,’ Papa said. ‘That’s what bankrupt means, it means you owe people money and can’t pay them.’

‘But Mr Pilaster is a good man, you always said.’

‘Toby Pilaster’s dead. He hanged himself, last night, in his office in London. He had a son Danny’s age.’

‘But how are we to feed our children?’

‘I don’t know,’ Papa said, and to Maisie’s horror he began to cry. ‘I’m sorry, Sarah,’ he said as the tears rolled into his beard. ‘I’ve brought you to this awful place where there are no Jews and no one to help us. I can’t pay the doctor, I can’t buy medicines, I can’t feed our children. I’ve failed you. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’ He leaned forward and buried his wet face in Mama’s breast. She stroked his hair with a shaky hand.

Maisie was appalled. Papa never cried. It seemed to mean the end of any hope. Perhaps they would all die now.

Danny stood up, looked at Maisie, and jerked his head toward the door. She got up and together they tiptoed out of the room. Maisie sat on the front step and began to cry. ‘What are we going to do?’ she said.

‘We’ll have to run away,’ Danny said.

Danny’s words gave her a cold feeling in her chest. ‘We can’t,’ she said.

‘We must. There’s no food. If we stay we’ll die.’

Maisie didn’t care if she died, but a different thought occurred to her: Mama would surely starve herself to feed the children. If they stayed, she would die. They had to leave to save her. ‘You’re right,’ Maisie said to Danny. ‘If we go, perhaps Papa will be able to find enough food for Mama. We’ve got to go, for her sake.’ Hearing herself say the words, she was awestruck by what was happening to her family. It was worse even than the day they had left Viskis, with the village houses still burning behind them,

and got on a cold train with all their belongings in two sailcloth bags; for then she had known that Papa would always look after her, no matter what else happened; and now she had to take care of herself.

‘Where will we go?’ she said in a whisper.

‘I’m going to America.’

‘America! How?’

‘There’s a ship in the harbour that’s bound for Boston on the morning tide – I’ll shin up a rope tonight and hide on deck in one of the boats.’

‘You’ll stow away,’ Maisie said, with fear and admiration in her voice.

‘That’s right.’

Looking at her brother, she saw for the first time that there was the shadow of a moustache beginning to show on his upper lip. He was becoming a man, and one day he would have a full black beard like Papa’s. ‘How long does it take to get to America?’ she asked him.

He hesitated, then looked foolish and said: ‘I don’t know.’

She realized that she was not included in his plans, and she felt miserable and scared. ‘We’re not going together, then,’ she said sadly.

He looked guilty, but he did not contradict her. ‘I’ll tell you what you should do,’ he said. ‘Go to Newcastle. You can walk there in about four days. It’s a huge city, bigger than Gdansk – no one will notice you there. Cut your hair, steal a pair of trousers and pretend to be a boy. Go to a big stables and help with the horses – you’ve always been good with horses. If they like you, you’ll get tips, and after a while they might give you a proper job.’

Maisie could not imagine being totally alone. ‘I’d rather go with you,’ she said.

‘You can’t. It’s going to be hard enough anyway, to hide

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myself on the ship, and steal food and so on. I couldn't look after you too.'

'You wouldn't have to look after me. I'd be as quiet as a mouse.'

'I'd feel worried about you.'

'Won't you worry about leaving me all on my own?'

'We've got to take care of ourselves!' he said angrily.

She saw that his mind was made up. She had never been able to talk him round when his mind was made up. With dread in her heart she said: 'When should we go? In the morning?'

He shook his head. 'Now. I'll need to get aboard the ship as soon as it's dark.'

'Do you really mean it?'

'Yes.' As if to prove it, he stood up.

She stood up too. 'Should we take anything?'

'What?'

She shrugged. She had no spare clothes, no souvenirs, no possessions of any kind. There was no food or money to take. 'I want to kiss Mama goodbye,' she said.

'Don't,' said Danny harshly. 'If you do, you'll stay.'

It was true. If she saw Mama now she would break down and tell everything. She swallowed hard. 'All right,' she said, fighting back the tears. 'I'm ready.'

They walked away side by side.

When they got to the end of the street she wanted to turn around and take a last look at the house; but she was afraid that if she did she would weaken; so she walked on, and never looked back.

[IV]

From *The Times*:

CHARACTER OF THE ENGLISH SCHOOLBOY – The Deputy-Coroner for Ashton, Mr H. S. Wasbrough, held an inquest yesterday at the Station Hotel, Windfield, on the body of Peter James St John Middleton, aged 13, a schoolboy. The boy had been swimming in a pool at a disused quarry near Windfield School when two older boys had seen him apparently in difficulties, the court was told. One of the older boys, Miguel Miranda, a native of Cordova, gave evidence that his companion, Edward Pilaster, aged 15, stripped off his outer clothing and dived in to try to save the younger boy, but to no avail. The headmaster of Windfield, Dr Herbert Poleson, testified that the quarry was out of bounds to pupils, but he was aware that the rule was not always obeyed. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death by drowning. The Deputy-Coroner then called attention to the bravery of Edward Pilaster in trying to save the life of his friend, and said the character of the English schoolboy, as formed by such institutions as Windfield, was a thing of which we might justifiably feel proud.

[V]

MICKY MIRANDA was captivated by Edward's mother.

Augusta Pilaster was a tall, statuesque woman in her thirties. She had black hair and black eyebrows and a haughty, high-cheekboned face with a straight, sharp nose and a strong chin. She was not exactly beautiful, and

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certainly not pretty, but somehow that proud face was deeply fascinating. She wore a black coat and a black hat to the inquest, and that made her even more dramatic. And yet what was so bewitching was the unmistakable feeling she gave Micky that the formal clothes covered a voluptuous body, and the arrogant, imperious manner concealed a passionate nature. He could hardly take his eyes off her.

Beside her sat her husband Joseph, Edward's father, an ugly, sour-faced man of about forty. He had the same big blade of a nose as Edward, and the same fair colouring, but his blond hair was receding, and he had bushy Dundreary side-whiskers sprouting from his cheeks as if to compensate for his baldness. Micky wondered what had made such a splendid woman marry him. He was very rich – perhaps that was it.

They were returning to the school in a carriage hired from the Station Hotel: Mr and Mrs Pilaster, Edward and Micky, and the headmaster, Dr Poleson. Micky was amused to see that the headmaster was also bowled over by Augusta Pilaster. Old Pole asked if the inquest had tired her, inquired if she was comfortable in the carriage, ordered the coachman to go slower, and leaped out at the end of the journey to have the thrill of holding her hand as she stepped down. His bulldog face had never looked so animated.

The inquest had gone well. Micky put on his most open and honest expression to tell the story he and Edward had made up, but inside he had been scared. The British could be very sanctimonious about telling the truth, and if he was found out he would be in deep trouble. But the court was so enchanted by the story of schoolboy heroism that no one questioned it. Edward was nervous, and stammered his evidence, but the coroner excused him, suggesting that he

was distraught over his failure to save Peter's life, and insisting he should not blame himself.

None of the other boys was asked to the inquest. Hugh had been taken away from the school on the day of the drowning because of the death of his father. Tonio was not asked to give evidence because nobody knew he had witnessed the death: Micky had scared him into silence. The other witness, the unknown boy at the far end of the pool, had not come forward.

Peter Middleton's parents were too grief-stricken to attend. They sent their lawyer, a sleepy-eyed old man whose only object was to get the whole thing over with a minimum of fuss. Peter's older brother David was there, and became quite agitated when the lawyer declined to ask Micky or Edward any questions, but to Micky's relief the old man waved aside his whispered protests. Micky was thankful for his laziness: Edward might have crumbled under sceptical questioning.

In the head's dusty drawing-room Mrs Pilaster embraced Edward and kissed the wound on his forehead where Tonio's stone had hit him. 'My poor dear child,' she said. Micky and Edward had not told anyone that Tonio had thrown a stone at Edward, for then they would have to explain why he did it. Instead they had said that Edward banged his head when he dived in to rescue Peter.

As they drank their tea, Micky saw a new side to Edward. His mother, sitting beside him on the sofa, touched him constantly and called him Teddy. Instead of being embarrassed, as most boys would, he seemed to like it, and kept giving her a winning little smile that Micky had never seen before. She's stupid about him, Micky thought, and he loves it.

After a few minutes of small talk Mrs Pilaster stood up abruptly, startling the men, who scrambled to their feet.

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'I'm sure you want to smoke, Dr Poleson,' she said. Without waiting for a reply she went on: 'Mr Pilaster will take a turn around the garden with you and have a cigar. Teddy, dear, go with your father. I should like to have a few quiet minutes in the chapel. Perhaps Micky would show me the way.'

'By all means, by all means, by all means,' the head stuttered, falling over himself in his eagerness to assent to this series of commands. 'Off you go, Miranda.'

Micky was impressed. How effortlessly she made them all do her bidding! He held the door open for her and followed her out.

In the hall he said politely: 'Would you like a parasol, Mrs Pilaster? The sun is quite strong.'

'No, thank you.'

They went outside. There were a lot of boys hanging around outside the head's house. Micky realized that word had got around about Pilaster's stunning mother, and they had all come to catch a glimpse of her. Feeling pleased to be her escort, he led her through a series of courtyards and quadrangles to the school chapel. 'Shall I wait outside for you?' he offered.

'Come inside. I want to talk to you.'

He began to feel nervous. His pleasure in escorting a striking mature woman around the school started to fade, and he wondered why she wanted to interview him alone.

The chapel was empty. She took a back pew and invited him to sit beside her. Looking straight into his eyes, she said: 'Now tell me the truth.'

Augusta saw the flash of surprise and fear in the boy's expression and knew that she was right.

However, he recovered in an instant. 'I've already told you the truth,' he said.

She shook her head. 'You have not.'

He smiled.

The smile took her by surprise. She had caught him out; she knew he was on the defensive; yet he could smile at her. Few men could resist the force of her will, but it seemed he was exceptional, despite his youth. 'How old are you?' she said.

'Sixteen.'

She studied him. He was outrageously good-looking, with his curly dark-brown hair and smooth skin, although there was already a hint of decadence in the heavy-lidded eyes and full lips. He reminded her somewhat of the Earl of Strang, with his poise and good looks. . . . She pushed that thought aside with a guilty pang. 'Peter Middleton was not in difficulties when you arrived at the pool,' she said. 'He was swimming around quite happily.'

'What makes you say this?' he said coolly.

He was scared, she sensed, but he maintained his composure. He was really quite remarkably mature. She found herself unwillingly showing more of her hand. 'You're forgetting that Hugh Pilaster was there,' she said. 'He is my nephew. His father took his own life last week, as you probably heard, and that is why he isn't here. But he has spoken to his mother, who is my sister-in-law.'

'What did he say?'

Augusta frowned. 'He said that Edward threw Peter's clothes into the water,' she said reluctantly. She did not really understand why Teddy would do such a thing.

'And then?'

Augusta smiled. This boy was taking control of the conversation. She was supposed to be questioning him, but

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instead he was interrogating her. 'Just tell me what really happened,' she said.

He nodded. 'Very well.'

When he said that, Augusta was relieved, but worried as well. She wanted to know the truth, but she feared what it might be. Poor Teddy – he had almost died, as a baby, because there had been something wrong with Augusta's breast-milk, and he nearly wasted away before the doctors discovered the nature of the problem and proposed a wet-nurse. Ever since then he had been vulnerable, needing her special protection. Had she had her way he would not have gone to boarding school, but his father had been intransigent about that. . . . She returned her attention to Micky.

'Edward didn't mean any harm,' Micky began. 'He was just ragging. He threw the other boys' clothes into the water as a joke.'

Augusta nodded. That sounded normal to her: boys teasing one another. Poor Teddy must have suffered that sort of thing himself.

'Then Hugh pushed Edward in.'

'That little Hugh has always been a troublemaker,' Augusta said. 'He's just like his wretched father was.' And like his father he would probably come to a bad end, she thought to herself.

'The other boys all laughed, and Edward pushed Peter's head under, to teach him a lesson. Hugh ran off. Then Tonio threw a stone at Edward.'

Augusta was horrified. 'But he might have been knocked unconscious, and drowned!'

'However, he wasn't, and he went chasing after Tonio. I was watching them: no one was looking at Peter Middleton. Tonio got away from Edward eventually. That was when

we noticed that Peter had gone quiet. We don't really know what happened to him: perhaps Edward's ducking exhausted him, so that he was too tired or too breathless to get out of the pool. Anyway, he was floating face down. We got him out of the water right away, but he was dead.'

It was hardly Edward's fault, Augusta thought. Boys were always rough with one another. All the same she was deeply grateful that this story had not come out at the inquest. Micky had covered up for Edward, thank heavens. 'What about the other boys?' she said. 'They must know what happened.'

'It was lucky that Hugh left the school that very day.'

'And the other one – did you call him Tony?'

'Antonio Silva. Tonio for short. Don't worry about him. He's from my country. He'll do as I tell him.'

'How can you be sure?'

'He knows that if he gets me into trouble, his family will suffer back home.'

There was something chilling in the boy's voice as he said this, and Augusta shivered.

'May I fetch you a shawl?' Micky said attentively.

Augusta shook her head. 'No other boys saw what happened?'

Micky frowned. 'There was another boy swimming in the pool when we got there.'

'Who?'

He shook his head. 'I couldn't see his face, and I didn't know it was going to be important.'

'Did he see what happened?'

'I don't know. I'm not sure at what point he left.'

'But he had gone by the time you got the body out of the water?'

'Yes.'

'I wish we knew who it was,' Augusta said anxiously.

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‘He may not even have been a schoolboy,’ Micky pointed out. ‘He could be from the town. Anyway, for whatever reason, he hasn’t come forward as a witness, so I suppose he’s no danger to us.’

No danger to us. It struck Augusta that she was involved with Micky in something dishonest, possibly illegal. She did not like the situation. She had got into it without realizing, and now she was trapped. She looked hard at him and said: ‘What do you want?’

She caught him off guard for the first time. Looking bewildered, he said: ‘What do you mean?’

‘You covered up for my son. You committed perjury today.’ He was unbalanced by her directness, she saw. That pleased her: she was in control again. ‘I don’t believe you took such a risk out of the goodness of your heart. I think you want something in return. Why don’t you just tell me what it is?’

She saw his gaze drop momentarily to her bosom, and for a wild moment she thought he was going to make an indecent suggestion. Then he said: ‘I want to spend the summer with you.’

She had not expected that. ‘Why?’

‘My home is six weeks’ journey away. I have to stay at school during the holidays. I hate it – it’s lonely and boring. I’d like to be invited to spend the summer with Edward.’

Suddenly he was a schoolboy again. She had thought he would ask for money, or perhaps a job at Pilasters Bank. But this seemed such a small, almost childish request. However, it clearly was not small to him. After all, she thought, he is only sixteen.

‘You shall stay with us for the summer, and welcome,’ she said. The thought did not displease her. He was a rather formidable young man in some ways, but his manners were perfect and he was good-looking: it would be

no hardship to have him as a guest. And he might be a good influence on Edward. If Teddy had a fault it was that he was rather aimless. Micky was just the opposite. Perhaps some of his strength of will would rub off on her Teddy.

Micky smiled, showing white teeth. 'Thank you,' he said. He seemed sincerely delighted.

She felt an urge to be alone for a while and mull over what she had heard. 'Leave me now,' she said. 'I can find my way back to the headmaster's house.'

He got up from the pew where they were sitting. 'I'm very grateful,' he said, and offered his hand.

She took it. 'I'm grateful to you, for protecting Teddy.'

He bent down, as if he were going to kiss her hand; and then, to her astonishment, he kissed her lips. It was so quick that she had no time to turn away. She searched for words of protest as he straightened up, but she could not think what to say. A moment later he was gone.

It was outrageous! He should not have kissed her at all, let alone on the lips. Who did he think he was? Her first thought was to rescind the summer invitation. But that would never do.

Why not? she asked herself. Why could she not cancel an invitation extended to a mere schoolboy? He had acted presumptuously, so he should not come to stay.

But the thought of going back on her promise made her uncomfortable. It was not just that Micky had saved Teddy from disgrace, she realized. It was worse than that. She had entered into a criminal conspiracy with him. It made her unpleasantly vulnerable to him.

She sat in the cool chapel for a long time, staring at the bare walls and wondering, with a distinct feeling of apprehension, how that handsome, knowing boy would use his power.

PART ONE

1873

CHAPTER ONE

May

[I]

WHEN MICKY MIRANDA was twenty-three his father came to London to buy rifles.

Señor Carlos Raul Xavier Miranda, known always as Papa, was a short man with massive shoulders. His tanned face was carved in lines of aggression and brutality. In leather chaps and a broad-brimmed hat, seated on a chestnut stallion, he could make a graceful, commanding figure; but here in Hyde Park, wearing a frock-coat and a top hat, he felt foolish, and that made him dangerously bad-tempered.

They were not alike. Micky was tall and slim, with regular features, and he got his way by smiling rather than frowning. He was deeply attached to the refinements of London life: beautiful clothes, polite manners, linen sheets and indoor plumbing. His great fear was that Papa would want to take him back to Cordova. He could not bear to return to days in the saddle and nights sleeping on the hard ground. Even worse was the prospect of being under the thumb of his older brother Paulo, who was a replica of Papa. Perhaps Micky would go home one day, but it would

be as an important man in his own right, not as the younger son of Papa Miranda. Meanwhile he had to persuade his father that he was more useful here in London than he would be at home in Cordova.

They were walking along South Carriage Drive on a sunny Saturday afternoon. The park was thronged with well-dressed Londoners on foot, on horseback or in open carriages, enjoying the warm weather. But Papa was not enjoying himself. 'I must have those rifles!' he muttered to himself in Spanish. He said it twice.

Micky spoke in the same language. 'You could buy them back home,' he said tentatively.

'Two thousand of them?' Papa said. 'Perhaps I could. But it would be such a big purchase that everyone would know about it.'

So he wanted to keep it secret. Micky had no idea what Papa was up to. Paying for two thousand guns, and the ammunition to go with them, would probably take all the family's reserves of cash. Why did Papa suddenly need so much ordnance? There had been no war in Cordova since the now-legendary March of the Cowboys, when Papa had led his men across the Andes to liberate Santamaria Province from its Spanish overlords. Who were the guns for? If you added up Papa's cowboys, relatives, placemen and hangers-on it would come to fewer than a thousand men. Papa had to be planning to recruit more. Whom would they be fighting? Papa had not volunteered the information and Micky was afraid to ask.

Instead he said: 'Anyway, you probably couldn't get such high-quality weapons at home.'

'That's true,' said Papa. 'The Westley-Richards is the finest rifle I've ever seen.'

Micky had been able to help Papa with his choice of rifles. Micky had always been fascinated by weapons of all

kinds, and he kept up with the latest technical developments. Papa needed short-barrelled rifles that would not be too cumbersome for men on horseback. Micky had taken Papa to a factory in Birmingham and shown him the Westley-Richards carbine with the breech-loading action, nicknamed the Monkeytail because of its curly lever.

‘And they make them so fast,’ Micky said.

‘I expected to wait six months for the guns to be manufactured. But they can do it in a few days!’

‘It’s the American machinery they use.’ In the old days, when guns had been made by blacksmiths who fitted the parts together by trial and error, it would indeed have taken six months to make two thousand rifles; but modern machinery was so precise that the parts of any gun would fit any other gun of the same pattern, and a well-equipped factory could turn out hundreds of identical rifles a day, like pins.

‘And the machine that makes two hundred thousand cartridges a day!’ Papa said, and he shook his head in wonderment. Then his mood switched again and he said grimly: ‘But how can they ask for the money before the rifles are delivered?’

Papa knew nothing about international trade, and he had assumed the manufacturer would deliver the rifles in Cordova and accept payment there. On the contrary, the payment was required before the weapons left the Birmingham factory.

But Papa was reluctant to ship silver coins across the Atlantic Ocean in barrels. Worse still, he could not hand over the entire family fortune before the arms were safely delivered.

‘We’ll solve this problem, Papa,’ Micky said soothingly. ‘That’s what merchant banks are for.’

‘Go over it again,’ Papa said. ‘I want to make sure I understand this.’

Micky was pleased to be able to explain something to Papa. ‘The bank will pay the manufacturer in Birmingham. It will arrange for the guns to be shipped to Cordova, and insure them on the voyage. When they arrive, the bank will accept payment from you at their office in Cordova.’

‘But then they have to ship the silver to England.’

‘Not necessarily. They may use it to pay for a cargo of salt beef coming from Cordova to London.’

‘How do they make a living?’

‘They take a cut of everything. They will pay the rifle manufacturer a discounted price, take a commission on the shipping and insurance, and charge you extra for the guns.’

Papa nodded. He was trying not to show it, but he was impressed, and that made Micky happy.

They left the park and walked along Kensington Gore to the home of Joseph and Augusta Pilaster.

In the seven years since Peter Middleton drowned, Micky had spent every vacation with the Pilasters. After school he had toured Europe with Edward for a year, and he had roomed with Edward during the three years they had spent at Oxford University, drinking and gambling and raising Cain, making only the barest pretence of being students.

Micky had never again kissed Augusta. He would have liked to. He wanted to do more than just kiss her. And he sensed that she might let him. Underneath that veneer of frozen arrogance there was the hot heart of a passionate and sensual woman, he was sure. But he had held back out of prudence. He had achieved something priceless by being accepted almost as a son in one of the richest families in England, and it would be insane to jeopardize that

cherished position by seducing Joseph's wife. All the same he could not help daydreaming about it.

Edward's parents had recently moved into a new house. Kensington Gore, which not so long ago had been a country road leading from Mayfair through the fields to the village of Kensington, was now lined, along its south side, by splendid mansions. On the north side of the street were Hyde Park and the gardens of Kensington Palace. It was the perfect location for the home of a rich commercial family.

Micky was not so sure about the style of architecture.

It was certainly striking. It was of red brick and white stone, with big leaded windows on the ground and first floors. Above the first floor was a huge gable, its triangular shape enclosing three rows of windows – six, then four, then two at the apex: bedrooms, presumably, for innumerable relatives, guests and servants. The sides of the gable were stepped, and on the steps were perched stone animals – lions and dragons and monkeys. At the very top was a ship in full sail. Perhaps it represented the slave ship which, according to family legend, was the foundation of the Pilasters' wealth.

'I'm sure there's not another house like this in London,' Micky said as he and his father stood outside staring at it.

Papa replied in Spanish. 'No doubt that is what the lady intended.'

Micky nodded. Papa had not met Augusta, but he had her measure already.

The house also had a big basement. A bridge crossed the basement area and led to the entrance porch. The door was open, and they went in.

Augusta was having a drum, an afternoon tea-party, to show off her house. The oak-panelled hall was jammed

with people and servants. Micky and his father handed their hats to a footman then pushed through the crowd to the vast drawing-room at the back of the house. The french windows were open, and the party spilled out on to a flagged terrace and a long garden.

Micky had deliberately chosen to introduce his father at a crowded occasion, for Papa's manners were not always up to London standards, and it was better that the Pilasters should get to know him gradually. Even by Cordovan standards he paid little attention to social niceties, and escorting him around London was like having a lion on a leash. He insisted on carrying his pistol beneath his coat at all times.

Papa did not need Micky to point Augusta out to him.

She stood in the centre of the room, draped in a royal blue silk dress with a low square neckline that revealed the swell of her breasts. As Papa shook her hand she gazed at him with her hypnotic dark eyes and said in a low, velvet voice: 'Sēnor Miranda – what a pleasure to meet you at last.'

Papa was immediately entranced. He bowed low over her hand. 'I can never repay your kindness to Miguel,' he said in halting English.

Micky studied her as she cast her spell over his father. She had changed very little since the day he had kissed her in the chapel at Windfield School. The extra line or two around her eyes only made them more fascinating; the touch of silver in her hair enhanced the blackness of the rest; and if she was a little heavier than she had been it made her body more voluptuous.

'Micky has often told me of your splendid ranch,' she was saying to Papa.

Papa lowered his voice. 'You must come and visit us one day.'

God forbid, Micky thought. Augusta in Cordova would be as out of place as a flamingo in a coal mine.

‘Perhaps I shall,’ Augusta said. ‘How far is it?’

‘With the new fast ships, only a month.’

He still had hold of her hand, Micky noticed. And his voice had gone furry. He had fallen for her already. Micky felt a stab of jealousy. If anyone was going to flirt with Augusta it should be Micky, not Papa.

‘I hear Cordova is a beautiful country,’ Augusta said.

Micky prayed Papa would not do anything embarrassing. However, he could be charming when it suited him, and he was now playing the role of romantic South American grandee for Augusta’s benefit. ‘I can promise you that we would welcome you like the queen you are,’ he said in a low voice; and now it was obvious that he was making up to her.

But Augusta was a match for him. ‘What an extraordinarily tempting prospect,’ she said with a shameless insincerity that went right over Papa’s head. Withdrawing her hand from his without missing a beat, she looked over his shoulder and cried: ‘Why, Captain Tillotson, how kind of you to come!’ And she turned away to greet the latest arrival.

Papa was bereft. It took him a moment to regain his composure. Then he said abruptly: ‘Take me to the head of the bank.’

‘Certainly,’ Micky said nervously. He looked around for Old Seth. The entire Pilaster clan was here, including maiden aunts, nephews and nieces, in-laws and second cousins. He recognized a couple of Members of Parliament and a sprinkling of lesser nobility. Most of the other guests were business connections, Micky judged – and rivals, too, he thought as he saw the thin, upright figure of Ben Greenbourne, head of Greenbournes Bank, said to be the

richest man in the world. Ben was the father of Solomon, the boy Micky had always known as Fatty Greenbourne. They had lost touch since school: Fatty had not studied at a university or done a European tour, but had gone straight into his father's business.

The aristocracy generally thought it vulgar to talk about money, but this group had no such inhibitions, and Micky kept hearing the word 'crash'. In the newspapers it was sometimes spelt 'Krach' because it had started in Austria. Share prices were down and the Bank Rate was up, according to Edward, who had recently started work at the family bank. Some people were alarmed, but the Pilasters felt confident that London would not be pulled down with Vienna.

Micky took Papa out through the french windows on to the paved terrace, where wooden benches were placed in the shade of striped awnings. There they found Old Seth, sitting with a rug over his knees despite the warm spring weather. He was weak from some unspecified illness, and he looked as frail as an eggshell, but he had the Pilaster nose, a big curved blade that made him formidable still.

Another guest was gushing over the old man, saying: 'What a shame you aren't well enough to go to the royal levee, Mr Pilaster!'

Micky could have told the woman this was the wrong thing to say to a Pilaster.

'On the contrary, I'm glad of the excuse,' Seth harrumphed. 'I don't see why I should bow the knee to people who have never earned a penny in their lives.'

'But the Prince of Wales – such an honour!'

Seth was in no mood to be argued with – indeed he rarely was – and he now said: 'Young lady, the name of Pilaster is an accepted guarantee of honest dealing in

corners of the globe where they've never heard of the Prince of Wales.'

'But Mr Pilaster, you almost sound as if you disapprove of the royal family!' the woman persisted, with a strained attempt at a playful tone.

Seth had not been playful for seventy years. 'I disapprove of idleness,' he said. 'The Bible says, "If any would not work, neither should he eat." St Paul wrote that, in Second Thessalonians, chapter three, verse ten, and he conspicuously omitted to say that royalty were an exception to the rule.'

The woman retired in confusion. Suppressing a grin, Micky said: 'Mr Pilaster, may I present my father, Señor Carlos Miranda, who is over from Cordova for a visit.'

Seth shook Papa's hand. 'Cordova, eh? My bank has an office in your capital city, Palma.'

'I go to the capital very little,' Papa said. 'I have a ranch in Santamaria Province.'

'So you're in the beef business.'

'Yes.'

'Look into refrigeration.'

Papa was baffled. Micky explained: 'Someone has invented a machine for keeping meat cold. If they can find a way to install it in ships, we will be able to send fresh meat all over the world without salting it.'

Papa frowned. 'This could be bad for us. I have a big salting plant.'

'Knock it down,' said Seth. 'Go in for refrigeration.'

Papa did not like people telling him what to do, and Micky felt a little anxious. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Edward. 'Papa, I want to introduce you to my best friend,' he said. He managed to ease his father away from Seth. 'Allow me to present Edward Pilaster.'

Papa examined Edward with a cold, clear-eyed gaze. Edward was not good-looking – he took after his father, not his mother – but he looked like a healthy farm boy, muscular and fair-skinned. Late nights and quantities of wine had not taken their toll – not yet, anyway. Papa shook his hand and said: ‘You two have been friends for many years.’

‘Soul mates,’ Edward said.

Papa frowned, not understanding.

Micky said: ‘May we talk business for a moment?’

They stepped off the terrace and on to the newly-laid lawn. The borders were freshly planted, all raw earth and tiny shrubs. ‘Papa has been making some large purchases here, and he needs to arrange shipping and finance,’ Micky went on. ‘It could be the first small piece of business you bring into your family bank.’

Edward looked keen. ‘I’ll be glad to handle that for you,’ he said to Papa. ‘Would you like to come into the bank tomorrow morning, so that we can make all the necessary arrangements?’

‘I will,’ said Papa.

Micky said: ‘Tell me something. What if the ship sinks? Who loses – us, or the bank?’

‘Neither,’ Edward said smugly. ‘The cargo will be insured at Lloyd’s. We would simply collect the insurance money and ship a new consignment to you. You don’t pay until you get your goods. What is the cargo, by the way?’

‘Rifles.’

Edward’s face fell. ‘Oh. Then we can’t help you.’

Micky was mystified. ‘Why?’

‘Because of Old Seth. He’s a Methodist, you know. Well, the whole family is, but he’s rather more devout than most. Anyway, he won’t finance arms sales, and as he’s Senior Partner, that’s bank policy.’

‘The devil it is,’ Micky cursed. He shot a fearful look at his father. Fortunately, Papa had not understood the conversation. Micky had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Surely his scheme could not founder on something as stupid as Seth’s religion? ‘The damned old hypocrite is practically dead, why should he interfere?’

‘He is about to retire,’ Edward pointed out. ‘But I think Uncle Samuel will take over, and he’s the same, you know.’

Worse and worse. Samuel was Seth’s bachelor son, fifty-three years old and in perfect health. ‘We’ll just have to go to another merchant bank,’ Micky said.

Edward said: ‘That should be straightforward, provided you can give a couple of sound business references.’

‘References? Why?’

‘Well, a bank always takes the risk that the buyer will renege on the deal, leaving them with a cargo of unwanted merchandise on the far side of the globe. They just need some assurance that they’re dealing with a respectable businessman.’

What Edward did not realize was that the concept of a respectable businessman did not yet exist in South America. Papa was a *caudillo*, a provincial landowner with a hundred thousand acres of pampas and a workforce of cowboys that doubled as his private army. He wielded power in a way the British had not known since the Middle Ages. It was like asking William the Conqueror for references.

Micky pretended to be unperturbed. ‘No doubt we can provide something,’ he said. In fact he was stumped. But if he was going to stay in London he had to bring this deal off.

They turned and strolled back towards the crowded terrace, Micky hiding his anxiety. Papa did not yet understand that they had encountered a serious difficulty,

but Micky would have to explain it later – and then there would be trouble. Papa had no patience with failure, and his anger was terrifying.

Augusta appeared on the terrace and spoke to Edward. ‘Find Hasted for me, Teddy darling,’ she said. Hasted was her obsequious Welsh butler. ‘There’s no cordial left and the wretched man has disappeared.’ Edward went off. She favoured Papa with a warm, intimate smile. ‘Are you enjoying our little gathering, Señor Miranda?’

‘Very well, thank you,’ said Papa.

‘You must have some tea, or a glass of cordial.’

Papa would have preferred tequila, Micky knew, but alcoholic drink was not served at Methodist tea-parties.

Augusta looked at Micky. Always quick to sense other people’s moods, she said: ‘I can see that you’re not enjoying the party. What’s the matter?’

He did not hesitate to confide in her. ‘I was hoping Papa could help Edward by bringing new business to the bank, but it involves guns and ammunition, and Edward has just explained that Uncle Seth won’t finance weapons.’

‘Seth won’t be Senior Partner much longer,’ Augusta said.

‘Apparently Samuel feels the same as his father.’

‘Does he?’ Augusta said, and her tone was arch. ‘And who says that Samuel is to be the next Senior Partner?’

[II]

HUGH PILASTER was wearing a new sky-blue ascot-style cravat, slightly puffed at the neckline and held in place with a pin. He really should have been wearing a new coat, but he earned only £68 a year, so he had to brighten up his old clothes with a new tie. The ascot was

the latest fashion, and sky-blue was a daring colour choice; but when he spied his reflection in the huge mirror over the mantelpiece in Aunt Augusta's drawing-room he saw that the blue tie and black suit looked rather fetching with his blue eyes and black hair, and he hoped the ascot gave him an attractively rakish air. Perhaps Florence Stalworthy would think so, anyway. He had started to take an interest in clothes since he met her.

It was a bit embarrassing, living with Augusta and being so poor; but there was a tradition at Pilasters Bank that men were paid what they were worth, regardless of whether they were family members. Another tradition was that everyone started at the bottom. Hugh had been a star pupil at school, and would have been head boy if he had not got into trouble so much; but his education counted for little at the bank, and he was doing the work of an apprentice clerk – and was paid accordingly. His aunt and uncle never offered to help him out financially, so they had to put up with his looking a little shabby.

He did not much care what they thought about his appearance, of course. It was Florence Stalworthy he was worried about. She was a pale, pretty girl, the daughter of the Earl of Stalworthy; but the most important thing about her was that she was interested in Hugh Pilaster. The truth was that Hugh could be fascinated by any girl who would talk to him. This bothered him, because it surely meant that his feelings were shallow; but he could not help it. If a girl touched him accidentally it was enough to make his mouth go dry. He was tormented by curiosity about what their legs looked like under all those layers of skirt and petticoat. There were times when his desire hurt like a wound. He was twenty years old, he had felt like this since he was fifteen, and in those five years he had never kissed anyone except his mother.

A party such as this drum of Augusta's was exquisite torture. Because it was a party, everyone went out of their way to be pleasant, find things to talk about, and show an interest in one another. The girls looked lovely and smiled and sometimes, discreetly, flirted. So many people were crowded into the house that inevitably some of the girls would brush up against Hugh, bump into him as they turned around, touch his arm, or even press their breasts against his back as they squeezed by. He would have a week of restless nights afterwards.

Many of the people here were his relations, inevitably. His father, Tobias, and Edward's father, Joseph, had been brothers. But Hugh's father had withdrawn his capital from the family business, started his own enterprise, gone bankrupt, and killed himself. That was why Hugh had left the expensive Windfield boarding school and become a day-boy at the Folkestone Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen; it was why he started work at nineteen instead of doing a European tour and wasting a few years at a university; it was why he lived with his aunt; and it was why he did not have new clothes to wear to the party. He was a relation, but a poor one; an embarrassment to a family whose pride, confidence and social standing were based on its wealth.

It would never have occurred to any of them to solve the problem by giving him money. Poverty was the punishment for doing business badly, and if you started to ease the pain for failures, why, there would be no incentive to do well. 'You might as well put feather-beds in prison cells,' they would say whenever someone suggested helping life's losers.

His father had been the victim of a financial crisis, but that made no difference. He had failed on 11 May 1866, a date known to bankers as Black Friday. On that day a bill-broker called Overend and Gurney Ltd had gone bankrupt

for five million pounds, and many firms were dragged down, including the London Joint Stock Bank and Sir Samuel Peto's building company, as well as Tobias Pilaster and Co. But there were no excuses in business, according to the Pilaster philosophy. Just at present there was a financial crisis, and no doubt one or two firms would fail before it was over; but the Pilasters were vigorously protecting themselves, shedding their weaker clients, tightening credit, and ruthlessly turning down all but the most unquestionably secure new business. Self-preservation was the highest duty of the banker, they believed.

Well, I'm a Pilaster, too, Hugh thought. I may not have the Pilaster nose, but I understand about self-preservation. There was a rage that boiled in his heart sometimes when he brooded about what had happened to his father, and it made him all the more determined to become the richest and most respected of the whole damn crew. His cheap day school had taught him useful arithmetic and science while his better-off cousin Edward was struggling with Latin and Greek; and not going to university had given him an early start in the business. He was never tempted to follow a different way of life, become a painter or a Member of Parliament or a clergyman. Finance was in his blood. He could give the current Bank Rate quicker than he could say whether it was raining. He was determined he would never be as smug and hypocritical as his older relatives, but all the same he was going to be a banker.

However, he did not think about it much. Most of the time he thought about girls.

He stepped out of the drawing-room on to the terrace and saw Augusta bearing down on him with a girl in tow.

'Dear Hugh,' she said, 'here's your friend Miss Bodwin.'

Hugh groaned inwardly. Rachel Bodwin was a tall, intellectual girl of radical opinions. She was not pretty –

she had dull brown hair and light eyes set rather close together – but she was lively and interesting, full of subversive ideas, and Hugh had liked her a lot when he first came to London to work at the bank. But Augusta had decided he should marry Rachel, and that had ruined the relationship. Before that they had argued fiercely and freely about divorce, religion, poverty and votes for women. Since Augusta had begun her campaign to bring them together, they just stood and exchanged awkward chit-chat.

‘How lovely you look, Miss Bodwin,’ he said automatically.

‘You’re very kind,’ she replied in a bored tone.

Augusta was turning away when she caught sight of Hugh’s tie. ‘Heavens!’ she exclaimed. ‘What is that? You look like an innkeeper!’

Hugh blushed crimson. If he could have thought of a sharp rejoinder he would have risked it, but nothing came to mind, and all he could do was mutter: ‘It’s just a new tie. It’s called an ascot.’

‘You shall give it to the boot-boy tomorrow,’ she said, and she turned away.

Resentment flared in Hugh’s breast against the fate that forced him to live with his overbearing aunt. ‘Women ought not to comment on a man’s clothes,’ he said moodily. ‘It’s not ladylike.’

Rachel said: ‘I think women should comment on anything that interests them, so I shall say that I like your tie, and that it matches your eyes.’

Hugh smiled at her, feeling better. She was very nice, after all. However, it was not her niceness that caused Augusta to want him to marry her. Rachel was the daughter of a lawyer specializing in commercial contracts. Her family had no money other than her father’s professional income, and on the social ladder they were

several rungs below the Pilasters; indeed they would not be at this party at all except that Mr Bodwin had done useful work for the bank. Rachel was a girl in a low station in life, and by marrying her Hugh would confirm his status as a lesser breed of Pilaster; and that was what Augusta wanted.

He was not completely averse to the thought of proposing to Rachel. Augusta had hinted that she would give him a generous wedding present if he married her choice. But it was not the wedding present that tempted him, it was the thought that every night he would be able to get into bed with a woman, and lift her nightdress up, past her ankles and her knees, past her thighs—

‘Don’t look at me that way,’ Rachel said shrewdly. ‘I only said I liked your tie.’

Hugh blushed again. Surely she could not guess what had been in his mind? His thoughts about girls were so grossly physical that he felt ashamed of himself much of the time. ‘Sorry,’ he mumbled.

‘What a lot of Pilasters there are,’ she said brightly, looking around. ‘How do you cope with them all?’

Hugh looked around too, and saw Florence Stalworthy come in. She was extraordinarily pretty, with her fair curls falling over her delicate shoulders, a pink dress trimmed with lace and silk ribbons, and ostrich feathers in her hat. She met Hugh’s eye and smiled at him across the room.

‘I can see I’ve lost your attention,’ Rachel said with characteristic bluntness.

‘I’m most awfully sorry,’ Hugh said.

Rachel touched his arm. ‘Hugh, dear, listen to me for a moment. I like you. You’re one of the few people in London society who aren’t unspeakably dull. But I don’t love you and I will never marry you, no matter how often your aunt throws us together.’

Hugh was startled. ‘I say—’ he began.

But she had not finished. 'And I know you feel much the same about me, so please don't pretend to be heartbroken.'

After a stunned moment, Hugh grinned. This directness was what he liked about her. But he supposed she was right: liking was not loving. He was not sure what love was, but she seemed to know. 'Does this mean we can go back to quarrelling about women's suffrage?' he said cheerfully.

'Yes, but not today. I'm going to talk to your old school friend, Sēnor Miranda.'

Hugh frowned. 'Micky couldn't spell "suffrage" let alone tell you what it means.'

'All the same, half the debutantes in London are swooning over him.'

'I can't imagine why.'

'He's a male Florence Stalworthy,' Rachel said, and with that she left him.

Hugh frowned, thinking about that. Micky knew Hugh was a poor relation and he treated him accordingly, so it was difficult for Hugh to be objective about him. He was very personable, and always beautifully dressed. He reminded Hugh of a cat, sleek and sensual with glossy fur. It was not quite the thing to be so carefully groomed, and men said he was not very manly, but women did not seem to care about that.

Hugh followed Rachel with his eyes as she crossed the room to where Micky stood with his father, talking to Edward's sister Clementine, Aunt Madeleine, and young Aunt Beatrice. Now Micky turned to Rachel, giving her his full attention as he shook her hand and said something that made her laugh. He was always talking to three or four women, Hugh realized.

All the same Hugh disliked the suggestion that Florence was somehow like Micky. She was attractive and popular,

as he was, but Micky was something of a cad, Hugh thought.

He made his way to Florence's side, feeling thrilled but nervous. 'Lady Florence, how are you?'

She smiled dazzlingly. 'What an extraordinary house!'

'Do you like it?'

'I'm not sure.'

'That's what most people say.'

She laughed as if he had made a witty remark, and he felt inordinately pleased.

He went on: 'It's very modern, you know. There are five bathrooms! And a huge boiler in the basement warms the whole place with hot-water pipes.'

'Perhaps the stone ship on top of the gable is a little too much.'

Hugh lowered his voice. 'I think so too. It reminds me of the cow's head outside a butcher's shop.'

She giggled again. Hugh was pleased that he could make her laugh. He decided it would be nice to get her away from the crowd. 'Come and see the garden,' he said.

'How lovely.'

It was not lovely, having only just been planted, but that did not matter in the least. He led her out of the drawing-room on to the terrace but there he was waylaid by Augusta, who shot him a look of reproof and said: 'Lady Florence, how kind of you to come. Edward will show you the garden.' She grabbed Edward, who was standing nearby, and ushered the two of them away before Hugh could say a word. He clenched his teeth in frustration and vowed he would not let her get away with this. 'Hugh, dear, I know you want to talk to Rachel,' she said. She took Hugh's arm and moved him back inside, and there was nothing he could do to resist her, short of snatching his arm

away and making a scene. Rachel was standing with Micky Miranda and his father. 'Micky, I want your father to meet my brother-in-law, Mr Samuel Pilaster.' She detached Micky and his father and took them off, leaving Hugh with Rachel again.

Rachel was laughing. 'You can't argue with her.'

'It would be like arguing with a dashed railway train,' Hugh fumed. Through the window he could see the bustle of Florence's dress as it swayed down the garden beside Edward.

Rachel followed his eyes and said: 'Go after her.'

He grinned. 'Thanks.'

He hurried down the garden. As he caught up, a wicked idea occurred to him. Why should he not play his aunt's game and detach Edward from Florence? Augusta would be spitting mad when she found out – but it would be worth it for the sake of a few minutes alone in the garden with Florence. To hell with it, he thought. 'Oh, Edward,' he said. 'Your mother asked me to send you to her. She's in the hall.'

Edward did not question this: he was used to sudden changes of mind by his mother. He said: 'Please excuse me, Lady Florence.' He left them and went into the house.

Florence said: 'Did she really send for him?'

'No.'

'You're so bad!' she said, but she was smiling.

He looked into her eyes, basking in the sunshine of her approval. There would be hell to pay later, but he would suffer much worse for the sake of a smile like that. 'Come and see the orchard,' he said.

[III]

AUGUSTA WAS amused by Papa Miranda. Such a squat peasant of a man! He was so different from his lithe, elegant son. Augusta was very fond of Micky Miranda. She always felt more of a woman when she was with him, even though he was so young. He had a way of looking at her as if she were the most desirable thing he had ever seen. There were times when she wished he would do more than just look. It was a foolish wish, of course, but all the same she felt it now and again.

She had been alarmed by their conversation about Seth. Micky assumed that when Old Seth died or retired, his son Samuel would take over as Senior Partner of Pilasters Bank. Micky would not have made that assumption on his own: he must have picked it up from the family. Augusta did not want Samuel to take over. She wanted the job for her husband Joseph, who was Seth's nephew.

She glanced through the drawing-room window and saw the four partners in Pilasters Bank together on the terrace. Three were Pilasters: Seth, Samuel and Joseph – the early nineteenth-century Methodists had favoured Biblical names. Old Seth looked like the invalid he was, sitting with a blanket over his knees, outliving his usefulness. Beside him was his son. Samuel was not as distinguished-looking as his father. He had the same beak-like nose, but below it was a rather soft mouth with bad teeth. Tradition would favour him to succeed because he was the eldest of the partners after Seth. Augusta's husband Joseph was speaking, making a point to his uncle and his cousin with short jabbing movements of his hand, a characteristically impatient gesture. He, too, had the Pilaster nose, but the rest of his features were rather irregular and he was losing

his hair. The fourth partner was standing back, listening with his arms folded. He was Major George Hartshorn, husband of Joseph's sister Madeleine. A former army officer, he had a prominent scar on his forehead from a wound received twenty years ago in the Crimean War. He was no hero, however: his horse had been frightened by a steam-traction engine and he had fallen and banged his head on the wheel of a kitchen wagon. He had retired from the army and joined the bank when he married Madeleine. An amiable man who followed where others led, he was not clever enough to run the bank, and anyway they had never had a Senior Partner whose name was not Pilaster. The only serious candidates were Samuel and Joseph.

Technically, the decision was made by a vote of the partners. By tradition, the family generally reached a consensus. In reality, Augusta was determined to have her way. But it would not be easy.

The Senior Partner of Pilasters Bank was one of the most important people in the world. His decision to grant a loan could save a monarch; his refusal could start a revolution. Along with a handful of others – J. P. Morgan, the Rothschilds, Ben Greenbourne – he held the prosperity of nations in his hands. He was flattered by heads of state, consulted by prime ministers, and courted by diplomats; and his wife was fawned upon by them all.

Joseph wanted the job, but he had no subtlety. Augusta was terrified that he would let the opportunity slip through his fingers. Left to himself he might say bluntly that he would like to be considered, then simply allow the family to decide. It might not occur to him that there were other things he should do to make sure he won the contest. For instance, he would never do anything to discredit his rival.

Augusta would have to find ways to do that for him.

She had no trouble identifying Samuel's weakness. At

the age of fifty-three he was a bachelor, and lived with a young man who was blithely referred to as his 'secretary'. Until now the family had paid no attention to Samuel's domestic arrangements, but Augusta was wondering if she could change all that.

Samuel had to be handled carefully. He was a fussy, finicky man, the kind who would change his entire outfit of clothes because a drop of wine had fallen on the knee of his trousers; but he was not weak, and could not be intimidated. A frontal assault was not the way to attack him.

She would have no regrets about injuring him. She had never liked him. He sometimes acted as if he found her amusing, and he had a way of refusing to take her at face value that she found deeply annoying.

As she moved among her guests, she put out of her mind the irritating reluctance of her nephew Hugh to pay court to a perfectly suitable young girl. That branch of the family had always been troublesome and she was not going to let it distract her from the more important problem that Micky had alerted her to, the threat of Samuel.

She spotted her sister-in-law, Madeleine Hartshorn, in the hall. Poor Madeleine, you could tell she was Joseph's sister, for she had the Pilaster nose. On some of the men it looked distinguished, but no woman could look anything but plain with a great beak like that.

Madeleine and Augusta had once been rivals. Years ago, when Augusta first married Joseph, Madeleine had resented the way the family began to centre around Augusta – even though Madeleine never had the magnetism or the energy to do what Augusta did, arranging weddings and funerals, matchmaking, patching up quarrels, and organizing support for the sick, the pregnant and the bereaved. Madeleine's attitude had come close to

causing a rift within the family. Then she had delivered a weapon into Augusta's hands. One afternoon Augusta had stepped into an exclusive Bond Street silverware shop just in time to see Madeleine slipping into the back of the store. Augusta had lingered for a while, pretending to hesitate over a toast rack, until she saw a handsome young man follow the same route. She had heard that the rooms above such stores were sometimes used for romantic rendezvous, and she was now almost certain that Madeleine was having a love affair. A five pound note had persuaded the proprietress of the shop, a Mrs Baxter, to divulge the name of the young man, Viscount Tremain.

Augusta had been genuinely shocked, but the first thought that had occurred to her was that what Madeleine could do with Viscount Tremain, Augusta could do with Micky Miranda. But that was out of the question, of course. Besides, if Madeleine could be found out, the same could happen to Augusta.

It could have ruined Madeleine socially. A man who had a love affair was considered wicked but romantic; a woman who did the same was a whore. If her secret got out she would be shunned by society and her family would be ashamed of her. Augusta's first thought was to use the secret to control Madeleine, holding over her head the threat of exposure. But that would make Madeleine forever hostile. It was foolish to multiply enemies unnecessarily. There had to be a way she could disarm Madeleine and at the same time make an ally of her. After much thought she had evolved a strategy. Instead of intimidating Madeleine with the information, she pretended to be on her side. 'A word to the wise, dear Madeleine,' she had whispered. 'Mrs Baxter cannot be trusted. Tell your viscount to find a more discreet rendezvous.' Madeleine had begged her to keep the secret and had been pathetically grateful when

Augusta willingly promised eternal silence. Since then there had been no rivalry between them.

Now Augusta took Madeleine's arm, saying: 'Come and see my room – I think you'll like it.'

On the first floor of the house were her bedroom and dressing-room, Joseph's bedroom and dressing-room, and a study. She led Madeleine into her bedroom, closed the door, and waited for her reaction.

She had furnished the room in the latest Japanese style, with fretwork chairs, peacock-feather wallpaper and a display of porcelain over the mantelpiece. There was an immense wardrobe painted with Japanese motifs, and the window-seat in the bay was partly concealed by dragonfly curtains.

'Augusta, how daring!' said Madeleine.

'Thank you.' Augusta was almost completely happy with the effect. 'There was a better curtain material I wanted but Liberty's had sold out of it. Come and see Joseph's room.'

She took Madeleine through the communicating door. Joseph's bedroom was furnished in a more moderate version of the same style, with dark leather-paper on the walls and brocade curtains. Augusta was especially proud of a lacquered display cabinet that held his collection of jewelled snuff-boxes.

'Joseph is so eccentric,' said Madeleine, looking at the snuff-boxes.

Augusta smiled. Her husband was not in the least eccentric, generally speaking, but it was odd for a hard-headed Methodist businessman to collect something so frivolous and exquisite, and the whole family found it amusing. 'He says they're an investment,' she said. A diamond necklace for her would have been an equally good investment, but he never bought her such things, for

Methodists considered jewellery to be a needless extravagance.

‘A man should have a hobby,’ Madeleine said. ‘It keeps him out of trouble.’

Out of warehouses was what she meant. The implied reference to men’s peccadilloes reminded Augusta of her purpose. Softly, softly, she said to herself. ‘Madeleine, dear, what *are* we going to do about cousin Samuel and his “secretary”?’

Madeleine looked puzzled. ‘Ought we to do something?’
‘If Samuel is to become Senior Partner, we must.’

‘Why?’

‘My dear, the Senior Partner of Pilasters has to meet ambassadors, heads of state, even royalty – he must be quite, *quite* irreproachable in his private life.’

Comprehension dawned, and Madeleine flushed. ‘Surely you’re not suggesting that Samuel is in some way . . . depraved?’

That was exactly what Augusta was suggesting, but she did not want to say it outright, for fear of provoking Madeleine to defend her cousin. ‘I trust that I shall never know,’ she said evasively. ‘The important thing is what people think.’

Madeleine was unconvinced. ‘Do you really suppose people think . . . that?’

Augusta forced herself to have patience with Madeleine’s delicacy. ‘My dear, we are both married women, and we know what men are like. They have animal appetites. The world assumes that a single man of fifty-three living with a pretty boy is vicious, and heaven knows, in most cases the world is probably right.’

Madeleine frowned, looking worried. Before she could say anything else there was a knock at the door and Edward came in. ‘What is it, mother?’ he asked.

Augusta was annoyed by the interruption and she had no idea what the boy was talking about. 'What do you mean?'

'You sent for me.'

'I most certainly did not. I told you to show Lady Florence around the garden.'

Edward looked hurt. 'Hugh said you wanted to see me!'

Augusta understood. 'Did he? And I suppose he is showing Lady Florence the garden now?'

Edward saw what she was getting at. 'I do believe he is,' he said, looking wounded. 'Don't be cross with me, Mother, please.'

Augusta melted instantly. 'Don't worry, Teddy dear,' she said. 'Hugh is such a sly boy.' But if he thought he could outwit his Aunt Augusta he was also foolish.

This distraction had irritated her, but on reflection she thought she had said enough to Madeleine about Cousin Samuel. At this stage all she wanted was to plant the seed of doubt: anything more might be too heavy-handed. She decided to leave well enough alone. She ushered her sister-in-law and her son out of the room, saying: 'Now I must return to my guests.'

They went downstairs. The party was going well, to judge by the cacophony of talk, laughter, and a hundred silver teaspoons clinking in bone china saucers. Augusta briefly checked the dining-room where the servants were dispensing lobster salad, fruit cake and iced drinks. She moved through the hall, speaking a word or two to each guest who caught her eye, but looking for a particular one – Florence's mother, Lady Stalworthy.

She was worried by the possibility that Hugh might marry Florence. Hugh was already doing far too well at the bank. He had the quick commercial brain of a barrow-boy and the engaging manners of a card-sharp. Even Joseph

spoke approvingly of him, oblivious of the threat to their own son. Marriage to the daughter of an earl would give Hugh social status to add to his native talents, and then he would be a dangerous rival to Edward. Dear Teddy did not have Hugh's superficial charm or his head for figures, so he needed all the help Augusta could give him.

She found Lady Stalworthy standing in the bay window of the drawing-room. She was a pretty middle-aged woman in a pink dress and a little straw hat with silk flowers all over it. Augusta wondered anxiously how she would feel about Hugh and Florence. Hugh was no great catch, but from Lady Stalworthy's point of view he was not a disaster. Florence was the youngest of three daughters, and the other two had married well, so Lady Stalworthy might be indulgent. Augusta had to prevent that. But how?

She stood at Lady Stalworthy's side and saw that she was watching Hugh and Florence in the garden. Hugh was explaining something, and Florence's eyes sparkled with pleasure as she looked at him and listened. 'The careless happiness of youth,' said Augusta.

'Hugh seems a nice boy,' Lady Stalworthy said.

Augusta looked hard at her for a moment. Lady Stalworthy had a dreamy smile on her face. She had once been as pretty as her daughter, Augusta guessed. Now she was remembering her own girlhood. She needed to be brought down to earth with a thump, Augusta decided. 'How quickly they pass, those carefree days.'

'But so idyllic while they last.'

It was time for the poison. 'Hugh's father died, as you know,' Augusta said. 'And his mother lives very quietly at Folkestone, so Joseph and I feel an obligation to take a parental interest.' She paused. 'It is hardly necessary for me to say that an alliance with your family would be a remarkable triumph for Hugh.'

‘How kind of you to say that,’ said Lady Stalworthy, as if she had been paid a pretty compliment. ‘The Pilasters themselves are a family of distinction.’

‘Thank you. If Hugh works hard he will one day earn a comfortable living.’

Lady Stalworthy looked a little taken aback. ‘His father left nothing at all, then?’

‘No.’ Augusta needed to let her know that Hugh would get no money from his uncles when he married. She said: ‘He will have to work his way up in the bank, living on his salary.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Lady Stalworthy, and her face showed a hint of disappointment. ‘Florence has a small independence, happily.’

Augusta’s heart sank. So Florence had money of her own. That was bad news. Augusta wondered how much it was. The Stalworthys were not as rich as the Pilasters – few people were – but they were comfortable, Augusta believed. At any rate, Hugh’s poverty was not enough to turn Lady Stalworthy against him. Augusta would have to use stronger measures. ‘Dear Florence would be such a help to Hugh . . . a stabilizing influence, I feel sure.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Stalworthy vaguely, and then she frowned. ‘Stabilizing?’

Augusta hesitated. This kind of thing was dangerous, but the risk had to be taken. ‘I never listen to gossip, and I’m sure you don’t either,’ she said. ‘Tobias *was* quite unfortunate, of that there is no doubt, but Hugh shows *hardly* any sign of having inherited the weakness.’

‘Good,’ said Lady Stalworthy, but her face showed deep anxiety.

‘All the same, Joseph and I would be very happy to see him married to such a sensible girl as Florence. One feels she would be firm with him, if . . .’ Augusta trailed off.

‘I . . .’ Lady Stalworthy swallowed. ‘I don’t seem to recall just what his father’s weakness was.’

‘Well, it wasn’t true, really.’

‘Strictly between you and me, of course.’

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t have raised it.’

‘But I must know everything, for my daughter’s sake. I’m sure you understand.’

‘Gambling,’ Augusta said in a lowered voice. She did not want to be overheard: there were people here who would know she was lying. ‘It was what led him to take his own life. The shame, you know.’ Pray heaven the Stalworthys don’t bother to check the truth of this, she thought fervently.

‘I thought his business failed.’

‘That, too.’

‘How tragic.’

‘Admittedly, Joseph has had to pay Hugh’s debts once or twice, but he has spoken very firmly to the boy, and we feel sure it will not happen again.’

‘That’s reassuring,’ said Lady Stalworthy, but her face told a different story.

Augusta felt she had probably said enough. The pretence that she was in favour of the match was wearing dangerously thin. She glanced out of the window again. Florence was laughing at something Hugh was saying, throwing her head back and showing her teeth in a way that was rather . . . unseemly. He was practically eating her up with his eyes. Everyone at the party could see they were attracted to one another. ‘I judge it won’t be long before matters come to a head,’ Augusta said.

‘Perhaps they have talked enough for one day,’ Lady Stalworthy said with a troubled look. ‘I had better intervene. Do excuse me.’

‘Of course.’

Lady Stalworthy headed rapidly for the garden.

Augusta felt relieved. She had carried off another delicate conversation. Lady Stalworthy was suspicious of Hugh now, and once a mother began to feel uneasy about a suitor she rarely came to favour him in the end.

She looked around and spotted Beatrice Pilaster, another sister-in-law. Joseph had had two brothers: one was Tobias, Hugh’s father, and the other was William, always called Young William because he was born twenty-three years after Joseph. William was now twenty-five and not yet a partner in the bank. Beatrice was his wife. She was like a large puppy, happy and clumsy and eager to be everyone’s friend. Augusta decided to speak to her about Samuel and his secretary. She went over to her and said: ‘Beatrice, dear, would you like to see my bedroom?’

[IV]

MICKY AND HIS father left the party and set out to walk back to their lodgings in Camberwell. Their route lay entirely through parks – first Hyde Park, then Green Park, and St James’s Park – until they reached the river. They stopped in the middle of Westminster Bridge to rest for a spell and look at the view.

On the north shore of the river was the greatest city in the world. Upstream were the Houses of Parliament, built in a modern imitation of the neighbouring thirteenth-century Westminster Abbey. Downstream they could see the gardens of Whitehall, the Duke of Buccleuch’s palace, and the vast brick edifice of the new Charing Cross Railway Station.

The docks were out of sight, and no big ships came this far up, but the river was busy with small boats and barges and pleasure-cruisers, a pretty sight in the evening sun.

The southern shore might have been in a different country. It was the site of the Lambeth potteries, and there, in mud fields dotted with ramshackle workshops, crowds of grey-faced men and ragged women were still at work boiling bones, sorting rubbish, firing kilns and pouring paste into moulds to make the drain-pipes and chimney-pots needed by the fast-expanding city. The smell was strong even here on the bridge, a quarter of a mile away. The squat hovels in which the workers lived were crowded around the walls of Lambeth Palace, the London home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, like the filth left by high tide on the muddy foreshore. Despite the nearness of the archbishop's palace the neighbourhood was known as the Devil's Acre, presumably because the fires and the smoke, the shuffling workers and the awful smell made people think of Hell.

Micky's lodgings were in Camberwell, a respectable suburb beyond the potteries; but he and his father hesitated on the bridge, reluctant to plunge into the Devil's Acre. Micky was still cursing the scrupulous Methodist conscience of Old Seth Pilaster for frustrating his plans. 'We will solve this problem about shipping the rifles, Papa,' he said. 'Don't worry about it.'

Papa shrugged. 'Who is standing in our way?' he asked.

It was a simple question, but it had a deep meaning in the Miranda family. When they had an intractable problem, they asked: *Who is standing in our way?* It really meant: *Who do we have to kill to get this done?* It brought back to Micky all the barbarism of life in Santamaria Province, all the grisly legends he preferred to forget: the story about how Papa had punished his mistress for being unfaithful to

him by putting a rifle up her and pulling the trigger; the time a Jewish family opened a store next to his in the provincial capital, so he set fire to it and burned the man and his wife and children alive; the one about the dwarf who had dressed up to look like Papa during the carnival, and made everyone laugh by strutting up and down in a perfect imitation of Papa's walk – until Papa calmly went up to the dwarf, drew a pistol, and blew his head off.

Even in Cordova this was not normal, but there Papa's reckless brutality had made him a man to be feared. Here in England it would get him thrown in jail. 'I don't anticipate the need for drastic action,' Micky said, trying to cover his nervousness with an air of unconcern.

'For now, there is no hurry,' Papa said. 'Winter is beginning at home. There will be no fighting until the summer.' He gave Micky a hard look. 'But I *must* have the rifles by the end of October.'

That look made Micky feel weak at the knees. He leaned against the stone parapet of the bridge to steady himself. 'I'll see to it, Papa, don't worry,' he said anxiously.

Papa nodded as if there could be no doubt about it. They were silent for a minute. Out of the blue, Papa said: 'I want you to stay in London.'

Micky felt his shoulders slump with relief. It was what he had been hoping for. He must have done something right, then. 'I think it might be a good idea, Papa,' he said, trying to hide his eagerness.

Then Papa dropped his bombshell. 'But your allowance will stop.'

'What?'

'The family can't keep you. You must support yourself.'

Micky was appalled. Papa's meanness was as legendary as his violence, but still this was unexpected. The Mirandas were rich. Papa had thousands of head of cattle,

monopolized all horse-dealing over a huge territory, rented land to small farmers and owned most of the stores in Santamaria Province.

It was true that their money did not buy much in England. Back home a Cordovan silver dollar would get you a slap-up meal, a bottle of rum and a whore for the night; here it would hardly stretch to a cheap meal and a glass of weak beer. That had come as a blow to Micky when he went to Windfield School. He had managed to supplement his allowance by playing cards, but he had found it hard to make ends meet until he befriended Edward. Even now Edward paid for all the expensive entertainments they shared: the opera, visits to racecourses, hunting and whores. Still, Micky needed a basic income to pay his rent, tailor's bills, subscriptions to the gentlemen's clubs that were an essential element of London life, and tips to servants. How did Papa expect him to find that? Take a job? The idea was appalling. No member of the Miranda family worked for wages.

He was about to ask how he was expected to live on no money when Papa abruptly changed the subject and said: 'I will now tell you what the rifles are for. We are going to take over the desert.'

Micky did not understand. The Miranda property covered a big area of Santamaria Province. Bordering their land was a smaller property owned by the Delabarca family. To the north of both was land so arid that neither Papa nor his neighbour had ever bothered to claim it. 'What do we want the desert for?' Micky said.

'Beneath the dust there is a mineral called nitrate. It's used as a fertilizer, much better than dung. It can be shipped all over the world and sold for high prices. The reason I want you to stay in London is to take charge of selling it.'

MAY, 1873

‘How do we know this stuff is there?’

‘Delabarca has started mining it. It has made his family rich.’

Micky felt excited. This could transform the family’s future. Not instantly, of course; not soon enough to solve the problem of how he would live with no allowance. But in the long term. . . .

‘We have to act fast,’ Papa said. ‘Wealth is power, and the Delabarca family will soon be stronger than we are. Before that happens, we have to destroy them.’