

HELEN MAGEE



FALSE ENCHANTMENT

Complete and Unabridged

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FALSE ENCHANTMENT

Nothing was ever the same after Perdita entered Abby's life. She was dressed in rags, but no one noticed that, only the extraordinary beauty of the exhausted child which grew even more haunting as the years passed. So too did the air of danger that clung to her, and Abby was plunged into a web of fear as Edmund, whom she had always loved, was caught up in Perdita's spell.

**PIP
POLLINGER IN PRINT**

**Pollinger Limited
9 Staple Inn
Holborn
LONDON
WC1V 7QH**

www.pollingerltd.com

**First published in Great Britain under the name of Elinor Dean
First published in 2001 by Robert Hale
This large print edition published by Pollinger in Print 2007**

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A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-905665-35-8

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For Margaret and Hugh with love

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Abby

There was the faintest scent of roses as I opened the door and stood for a moment on the threshold. Then, closing it quietly behind me, I stepped into the room. I looked around at the pretty pink damask covered chairs, at the half tester bed canopied and counterpaned in the same material and finally at the two long windows on the far side of the room, curtained in heavy rose velvet. One of them was open slightly and I moved towards it, drawn by the faint sough of the sea in the distance. I stood for a moment looking out on the moors and the gleam of water beyond. I felt stifled, closed in. My veil was heavy and suffocating so I took it off and laid it and the hat on a little escritoire in front of the window. It looked sombre and out of place on the pretty little desk and the black folds of the veil stirred menacingly in the draught from the window.

I pushed it aside, impatient with myself for entertaining such fancies and as I did so a thick packet of papers fell to the floor. I bent to pick it up. It was sealed and on it, in large sprawling handwriting, was written 'Abby'. I sat down slowly at the desk. My legs no longer seemed able to support me and I could feel the blood beat in my temples for I had recognised that writing. It was Perdita's, and I felt suddenly afraid.

It is strange how one person can change the whole course of another's life. That is what Perdita did when she came to Hadley Grange. Perdita — she was a creature from another world, a nymph, a changeling and from the moment she appeared she fascinated all who came in contact with her, and I, so different from this exotic flower, was a willing admirer. My childhood, before she came, seems almost like a dream now, a beautiful memory, something that happened to someone else. It was as if my life had been destroyed and remade after she came. Nothing was ever the same again. When I think of that childhood it is like looking into an old and dim looking glass where the world was a calm and predictable place and I had not learned to be afraid.

I was born Abigail Augusta Hammond, a grand name for a sickly child who came near to dying, as did my mother, who

after a long and painful labour gave up the fight and died whilst I was being drawn from her womb. So you might say that I was born an orphan for my father had died in a shipwreck some months before my birth and it was his death, so Aunt Josephine always said, that broke my mother's spirit and took away her will to live. Aunt Josephine was not my real aunt. My mother had been the daughter of a parson and when he died she, having no other relatives, was faced with a choice: to marry the curate and be assured of a roof over her head for life or to find employment and make her own future.

'I wish you had known your mother, my dear,' Aunt Josephine had said as she told me the story, 'such a spirited girl and so pretty. There was no question of her accepting the curate although I understand he was more than willing and was by all accounts quite a personable young man.'

And so it was that, on the recommendation of some mutual friends she came to the mistress of Hadley Grange whom I now called Aunt Josephine, as lady's maid and companion.

'A delightful creature, like a breath of spring air,' said Aunt Josephine, dabbing at her eyes with an inadequate scrap of lace, 'and when your father came to see Uncle

Bart about business, well it was love at first sight for both of them. So romantic, really it was quite affecting,' and she dabbed once again.

There they were then, those two young people, so much in love and set for a glittering future for the young Augustus Hammond had plans and ambition, but tragedy struck and he went down with the ship and the cargo that was to make his fortune and within a few months I was born and my pretty mother had joined her young husband.

'She always said that if she had a girl she would be called Abigail, for that is the old name for a lady's maid and she would never have met your father if she had not come to me as lady's maid,' said Aunt Josephine, 'and of course Augusta after your dear father.'

My father's people were glad enough to leave me with Aunt Josephine and Uncle Bart. Had I been a boy they might have had more interest in me but I was a girl and they had tied up much of their fortune in the enterprise that ended in my father's death and had lost most of it. They were not particularly wealthy and I think I would have proved a sad reminder to them of the losses they had incurred. And so I remained at Hadley Grange where my mother had been awaiting the return of Augustus

Hammond and the fortune he was going to make and as the years passed no-one could have been kinder than Aunt Josephine and Uncle Bart and of course Edmund.

Edmund was their only child, the apple of their eye for they had quite given up hope of a child and when he was born, a son, they were overwhelmed. If anyone should have been a spoilt darling it was Edmund but it was just not possible to spoil him. We grew up together, he and I, and he was like a brother to me, always there to protect me when Sinclair Rothwell called me an orphan or worse in that mocking way he had even when a child, and they would fight even though Sinclair was twice the size of Edmund and, oddly enough, Edmund would sometimes win for he was lighter and quicker than Sinclair and did not lose his temper so easily. I have seen Edmund come upon a group of boys tormenting a cat and rush pell mell into their midst, arms flailing for he could not bear to see anything weak or helpless being picked on whether it was me or a stray cat. These were the only times I ever saw Edmund really angry and Sinclair would wade into the fight after him grumbling and I would hop from foot to foot until they emerged bloodied but triumphant with the cat which would more often than not spit at them and scratch

them for their pains. And so we grew up, Edmund, Sinclair and me, squabbling and laughing together in a magical world where I would trot at the boys' heels with Sinclair muttering about stupid girls and Edmund, my champion, defending me. Oh, how I hero worshipped him. Sinclair and I on the other hand were forever arguing. I once accused him of being jealous because I always agreed with Edmund and he stumped off in a rage. We didn't see him for two days which was wonderful for me because I had Edmund all to myself.

Mostly, however, we were together. Sinclair's people owned the adjoining estate which was in fact much bigger than the Grange's and when we were a little older he would ride over every day and we would go off on our ponies along the cliff tops. There was an old ruined church up on the moor and we used to visit it sometimes, playing kings and queens amongst its crumbling walls. The graveyard was still in use and we would play hide and seek amongst the headstones. Sinclair said it gave him the creeps and I must admit I did not care overmuch for playing amongst the graves but Edmund liked the place so I said I did too and Sinclair was overruled.

We would ride our ponies as close to the cliff edge as we dared and lie down flat

on our fronts to peer over the edge at the foaming sea below. There was one place in particular where the sea came rushing into a natural funnel in the cliff face with a curious sucking noise. On stormy days it would seethe and boil and Sinclair told us in blood curdling tones that it was called the 'Devil's Cauldron'. I tried to take no notice of him for he was always trying to scare me but I crept back from the edge just the same.

'You're a terrible liar, Sinclair Rothwell', I said.

'Oh, no I'm not, and it's true. The bones of the damned are thrown up from Hell and boiled for soup in the cauldron,' he intoned in a sepulchral voice and began to creep towards me making horrible gurgling noises.

'Stop it at once,' I said severely, 'you're just a baby if you believe that nonsense.'

'Then why did you scurry away like that?'

'I did not scurry. I was only . . .'

'Oh, be quiet you two,' said Edmund, 'we've only got another week and then we'll be going off to school.' Sinclair and I fell silent. All summer it had been at the back of our minds. I was to continue my morning lessons with old Reverend Hargreaves at the Vicarage but it was time for the boys to go away to school. Many boys were sent away earlier than

they were, for Edmund was now twelve and Sinclair was already thirteen, but Aunt Josephine was in no hurry to send her boy away and Sinclair, who was supposed to have gone the year before, had been disinclined to go which means that he had schemed and plotted his way out of it. This year however he could no longer avoid it and every time school was mentioned a cloud seemed to settle on him.

‘School,’ he groaned, ‘disgusting food and no ponies.’

‘At least we’ll be together,’ said Edmund.

Sinclair brightened visibly,

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and at least we shan’t have to drag a silly girl around with us all the time.’

It was my turn to feel unhappy then and Edmund jumped to his feet and tweaked my hair,

‘Come on, Abby. Race you home.’ And we were up on our ponies and galloping off before Sinclair had time to mount.

We had slowed to a canter when there was a rush of galloping hoofbeats behind us and Sinclair careered past us at a sharp angle, cleared a drystone wall and thundered off in the direction of Moreton Hall.

‘I hope he makes it safely home,’ said Edmund. ‘Someday he’ll break his neck doing things like that.’

‘The devil takes care of his own,’ I said sourly.

Edmund smiled at me,

‘Come now, Abby. You like him really.’

‘Huh! I thought we were supposed to be having a race,’ I said, gathering the reins. He was looking at me speculatively.

‘Oh, he’s all right, I suppose,’ I said.

He grinned and suddenly we were flying homeward, the turf spurting beneath the ponies’ hooves and the wind whipping our cheeks to crimson. That was the afternoon that Perdita arrived and nothing was ever the same again.

I had been sent upstairs immediately we got home to wash and change for tea.

‘My dear, you really must not romp so,’ said Aunt Josephine. ‘After all you will soon be a young lady.’

She did not look over confident as she made this last remark and I kissed her,

‘I’m only eleven, Aunt Josephine. I won’t be a young lady for years yet but I promise I won’t ‘romp’ so much if you dislike it.’

‘You’re such a good girl, Abby. Just like your dear mother and really you’re becoming quite pretty.’

I laughed and ran upstairs to my bedroom. Tossing my riding hat on the bed I turned to the mirror, shaking my hair loose as I did so.

My hair was easily my best feature being silver gilt in colour and both abundant and naturally curly. As for the rest I was of the opinion that Aunt Josephine was decidedly biased in her opinion. The face that looked back at me was decidedly pudgy, the blue eyes round and solemn. I looked like a serious baby owl. There was a tap on the door and Mary, the new little maid, came in with a can of hot water.

‘Thank you, Mary,’ I said.

She bobbed a curtsy and made to leave.

‘Mary,’ I said, ‘how old are you?’

She flushed and looked shy,

‘Thirteen, Miss, if you please.’

‘Thank you, Mary, that will be all,’ I said, but when she had gone I sat for a moment by the window. Only thirteen, only two years older than I was. Perhaps Aunt Josephine was right after all. I decided that if I was a young lady I should have a maid all to myself and Mary would do nicely. I would ask Aunt Josephine about it at tea, I thought as I dressed.

However all thoughts of being a young lady with a maid of my own or of even wanting to be a young lady evaporated as

I emerged from my room. I had reached the head of the staircase when I heard the commotion and as I looked down on the hall below it was as if time stood still for a moment and I was looking at a painting or a stage set.

There in the centre of the stage stood a girl of about my own age. Even the deplorable clothes she wore could not hide the grace of her figure. Uncle Bart and Aunt Josephine, closely attended by Bowman the butler, seemed frozen in attitudes of horror but it was not at any of them that the girl was looking and nor was she looking at the crumpled body of the man who lay at her feet, his face deathly pale and his breath a rattle in his throat. She looked not at any of these but at Edmund who was standing below me on the staircase where it curved in a great sweep down into the hall. I could not see his face from where I stood, only the angle of his head as he seemed to bend towards her, but I had a clear view of the girl's face and on it was what I can only describe as a curious mixture of hunger and adoration, and then all was noise and confusion and the scene below me shivered and broke into a thousand pieces and I too shivered as a cold wind seemed to blow about me. In a moment it was gone and as I ran down the stairs I chided myself for my foolishness

and ignored the little voice inside my head that whispered 'danger'.

The man on the floor was half carried, half dragged into the morning room and propped up on a sofa. He looked ghastly and his breathing was becoming more laboured by the minute. All the while the girl had scarcely moved and had said not a word. She looked scared to death, as well she might, for it would appear that the man was her father.

Aunt Josephine bustled out of the morning room, her good natured face full of concern.

'Bowman, tell Alice and Kate to come to the rose room at once,' she said as she enfolded the girl in her ample embrace and guided her towards the stairs.

I felt a slight sense of shock. No one was ever allowed to use the rose room. It was Elizabeth's room, or had been until she had run off and married some penniless music hall singer. I had always thought it quite romantic but Aunt Josephine would not speak of it. Elizabeth had been Uncle Bart's step-sister, much younger than he was and very much the spoilt darling of her older half-brother. Her elopement, said Aunt Josephine, had upset him greatly and her room was kept just as she had left it in case she should ever return. I looked

around for Uncle Bart but he had gone, presumably to send Hodges, the groom, for Dr Jarrow. I felt a light touch on my arm and started,

‘Edmund,’ I said, ‘what is going on? Why is that girl being taken to the rose room?’

He looked at me, puzzled,

‘Didn’t you hear their story?’ he said, ‘her name is Perdita. She is Elizabeth’s daughter.’

I fairly squeaked with excitement and dragged him off into the garden bombarding him with questions. He held up his hands in mock surrender.

‘Whoa,’ he said, ‘I’ll tell you if you’d only give me half a chance.’

I grinned and linked my arm through his, ‘All right, tell all, but isn’t it romantic,’ I said.

‘Pretty sordid if you ask me,’ said Edmund, ‘they look as if they haven’t eaten for days and that poor little girl. She looked so forlorn.’

‘Tell,’ I hissed through my teeth, ‘before I simply burst with curiosity.’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘you know Elizabeth’s story of course.’

‘How she fell in love with a young man who was engaged to play the piano and sing at her very first coming out party, how the family were outraged when they found out

he was staying in the neighbourhood in order to meet her clandestinely,' I sighed. 'Isn't that a lovely word, clandestinely.' I caught his amused look and went on defiantly, 'and how she forsook everything to elope with him leaving only a tear-stained note for Uncle Bart who was quite heart-broken.'

'I suppose you could put it that way,' said Edmund drily, 'certainly she did run off and was not heard of again, until today that is.'

I looked at him expectantly,

'Where is she?', I said.

'She died some years ago, according to her husband, leaving a little daughter she had called Perdita. They had been quite successful until then, he says, singing romantic duets in the music halls but her death seems to have put an end to any success they had and things have been getting steadily worse since then. He thought if he brought the child here Uncle Bart might help them, for her mother's sake. You know he's even put that poor child on the stage. Think of it, a fragile little thing like that living her life in seedy dressing rooms and theatrical digs when she could have had a home here. The man's a monster.' His fists were clenched and his eyes fairly sparked fire as he strode on at such a pace I had to run to keep up.

Here we go again, I thought, another stray for Edmund to take under his wing. Let's hope the 'monster' could take care of himself for once Edmund got wind of what he considered an injustice woe betide the culprit. But the culprit in this case was very ill. I stopped,

'Edmund,' I shouted after him, 'Edmund.'

He turned and walked towards me,

'Do you think he's going to die?'

He at once looked shame-faced,

'He certainly looked very ill,' he said, 'let's go back and see how he is.'

Dr Jarrow's carriage was drawn up in the drive as we hurried back into the house but the hall was empty. The morning room door opened quietly and Bowman came out. He looked very solemn. A moment later Uncle Bart emerged from the room. It was a shock to us to see how distressed he looked. I went to him and put my hand in his,

'How is he, Uncle?' I said.

He shook his head and laid his hand on my hair,

'He never regained consciousness,' he said. 'We must take care of the child, Abby. We must take care of Elizabeth's child.' And he shambled off to his study looking suddenly old. I was more upset by this than by anything. This was so unlike the Uncle Bart I knew, the dreamy, forgetful, funny,

pleasant Uncle who was so overshadowed by his voluble wife you often overlooked his presence and were startled when he broke into speech, although what he said rarely bore any relation to the conversation of the moment and seldom required an answer. Edmund made as if to follow him but at that moment Aunt Josephine appeared at the head of the staircase, escorted by Bowman.

‘No, Edmund, let him be,’ she said, ‘he has had a shock.’

‘But, mother . . .’

‘Do as I say, Edmund.’ His mother’s voice, usually so indulgent with him, was firm. ‘I shall go to him in a little while, when he has had time to collect himself.’

I envied Edmund then for having parents and such devoted ones at that whilst here was I with none, like Perdita, I thought.

‘How is she, Aunt? Is she ill too?’

‘No she’s not ill but she is very tired. I left her almost asleep and I do not wish her to be disturbed. She will learn the sad news soon enough. You may bring tea now, Bowman,’ she said, ‘I think that would do us all good.’

And so, practical Aunt Josephine made conversation amongst the tea cups whilst across the hall a man lay dead and above us his daughter slept in ignorance of the fact

that she had both lost a father and found a new family.

He was buried in the graveyard on the moor which had always been the final resting place of the Hadleys and his little daughter, though pale, bore up bravely during the service and the long procession from the new church a mile away. The house did not go into mourning. Aunt Josephine said that since we had not known him in life it would be an empty gesture and that the child should be encouraged to forget her past and think only of the future. Aunt Josephine did not approve of 'brooding'. I was forbidden to quiz Perdita about her life on the music hall stage which was agony for I was consumed with curiosity about her. She was an extraordinary creature. To me she did not seem like a child at all. She seemed much older than me though she was in fact the younger by some months and always there was about her a faint air of mystery. Sometimes she would look quite haggard as if she had not slept but if I asked her if this was the case she would deny it vehemently. I was fascinated by her, by her dark beauty and her rapid changes of mood and manner. She was eager to hear all I knew of Elizabeth, her mother, but when I asked her questions in return she would become so distressed I would cease immediately. Sometimes,

however, she would humour me and sing me music hall ditties and show me odd tricks with playing cards. She could even juggle and promised one day to teach me. She had a locket which had belonged to her mother and inside were miniatures of both her parents. The picture of her father was of a young man, handsome and debonair, and I found it sad to think of his wretched end. There was certainly no trace of that hopeful young man in the poor creature who died so pitifully in the morning room of Hadley Grange. Her mother's picture was instantly recognizable for there was at the Grange a painting done just before her eighteenth birthday and the pretty young girl who looked so gaily out of the locket was well known to me, for I had often sighed over that portrait as over a heroine of romance. No wonder Perdita did not wish to speak of them.

Life at the Grange slipped into its usual pattern or nearly so. Edmund went off to school at the end of that summer and Perdita was crestfallen. As I had guessed, Edmund had taken her under his wing and she clearly adored him. Poor Edmund. With my hero worship and Perdita's adoration I think he was glad to go off to school. Not so Sinclair who continued to bemoan the need for

education. He was enjoying himself at the Grange these days,

‘Come on, Perdita, show me that trick just once more. I’ve almost got it,’ or, ‘If you teach me to juggle, I’ll give you my best treasure.’

‘You’re too clumsy to learn,’ Perdita would say, ‘and besides if Aunt Josephine found out she’d be angry.’

‘Oh, I won’t tell her. Come on, Perry, be a sport.’ Then Perdita would flash at him,

‘Don’t call me nicknames, my name is Perdita.’

‘Well Edmund calls you nicknames. He calls you Rose Red. But then he’s your handsome prince isn’t he.’ And then Perdita would fly at him and Sinclair would hold her off laughing at her which only infuriated her more,

‘I’ll show you,’ she would shout, ‘just wait.’

They were well matched those two. Once Perdita sank her teeth into Sinclair’s hand and he had to go around with a bandage for days. When Aunt Josephine asked how it had happened, he said it had been an angry cat and looked significantly at Perdita. Aunt Josephine was too busy bending over the wound to notice but Perdita fairly sparkled with rage. She did however teach him to

juggle though I never discovered what he offered her in return.

When the boys left for school Aunt Josephine called Perdita and me into the drawing room. Uncle Bart was there too which was unusual. He was more often to be found in his study dozing over some book on rare butterflies which he collected with a passion he reserved for no other activity.

Aunt Josephine looked rather severe so we stood demurely in the middle of the floor and waited.

‘I have decided that since we now have the education and upbringing of two girls rather than just one to consider, we would be well advised to find you a governess, is that not so, Bart?’

Uncle Bart started violently. Every so often Aunt Josephine seemed to feel the need to involve him in the process of making a decision and it never failed to take him by surprise,

‘Oh, ah, capital, certainly. I’ll see to it at once, my dear,’ and he looked at us sternly, vaguely aware that we were somehow involved in this and taking his cue from Aunt Josephine’s unbending expression.

Aunt Josephine sighed and allowed him to relax once more with the book of butterfly prints he had been perusing.

‘I have noticed recently,’ she continued, ‘that you have been romping more than is quite suitable for young ladies.’ I groaned inwardly. She certainly seemed to have a bee in her bonnet about this romping business.

‘I trust that a governess will not only teach you your lessons rather better than old Reverend Hargreaves who is becoming rather elderly now.’

Elderly, I thought, senile more like. Most of my time was spent sticking little bits of paper on the end of his nose and watching them blow off as he snored whilst I was supposed to be completing the exercise he had set or reading an improving book. Aunt Josephine was still speaking,

‘She will also be able to instruct you in the correct ways of speech and behaviour which are so important to any young lady.’

So that was how Miss Pettigrew came to Hadley Grange. I have often wondered whether this decision of Aunt Josephine’s was a tactful way of handling an awkward situation. Perdita had been brought up in the theatre where manners are looser and vocabulary often a trifle colourful. It did not happen often, but I had already witnessed Bowman’s bulging eyes and outraged dignity on overhearing some

of Perdita's more colourful descriptions of Sinclair Rothwell, and it must be admitted that there were occasionally difficulties of etiquette which needed to be overcome. I derived a great deal of pleasure from the description of Sinclair however and tea with callers present was always enlivened by the frisson of danger when Perdita was there but I had to admit that this was hardly fair on Perdita.

Miss Pettigrew was a sweet creature, young and pretty and from a good but impoverished family. She was a friend to us as well as a governess and with her calm good sense and her own example over the years, eventually turned us into those most valued of creatures, young ladies.

Perdita especially owed her an enormous debt but oddly enough seemed to resent her and this grew more pronounced the longer Miss Pettigrew was with us. By the time we were sixteen Perdita was convinced we didn't need a governess any longer and especially not Miss Pettigrew.

'She interferes too much,' she told me once, 'always poking and prying and asking questions.'

'But, Perdita,' I said, 'that's because she is so interested in us and besides she does not poke and pry, she simply wants to show us how to understand ourselves and

other people.’ I was quoting Miss Pettigrew here.

‘That’s what she says,’ said Perdita, ‘I know differently.’ She looked at me darkly.

‘I can hear her at night sometimes pacing up and down in her room. I think she spies on us.’

I laughed, I really could not help it,

‘Oh, Perdita, what an imagination you’ve got. Of course you can hear her. So can I and she can probably hear us. After all her room is between ours.’

‘Exactly,’ said Perdita mysteriously.

I was losing patience with her,

‘Oh, don’t be such a goose, Perdita. What do you suspect her of — stealing the family jewels?’

She looked at me out of the corners of those dark green eyes of hers that could sometimes appear almost black. I felt mesmerised by them as usual,

‘Perhaps,’ she said and the spell was broken.

‘You’re just teasing,’ I said. ‘Poor Miss Pettigrew, how would you like to have no money and no family and have to depend on mischievous girls for your livelihood?’ I said and then stopped. Perdita’s face had gone quite pale,

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Perdita. It’s been so long now, I’d almost forgotten you didn’t always have us. Forgive me?’

She smiled suddenly and I felt the force of her charm.

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘if you’ll forget all the nonsense I’ve been talking. I only did it to tease you.’

I shook my head. There were times when I thought I would never understand Perdita, her lightning changes of mood and her passionate likes and dislikes. I left her gazing out of the window towards the stable yard where Hodges had just led out Moonfleet, Perdita’s sixteenth birthday present. He was a beautiful beast, as black as midnight with the faintest bluish sheen and as swift as the wind, Perdita said. She had chosen him herself. She seemed to have a natural affinity with horses. She spoke to them and they seemed to understand her, even a highly strung beast like Moonfleet who had a lot of Arab blood in him, was gentle at her command. Aunt Josephine had been more than concerned when she saw the animal Perdita had chosen but Perdita was persuasive and even Hodges grudgingly admitted that the ‘young miss’ was a match for the animal.

There was no love lost between Hodges and Perdita for all that he admired her skill as a horsewoman, and the last thing I heard as I went down the corridor was Perdita bellowing out of the window,

‘Hodges, that is not a carthorse you are leading. Mind his mouth, man.’

For such a slender girl she had an unusually powerful voice, and as I continued out into the yard and along the trellised terrace which bordered it I had to suppress a smile as I heard Hodges thick accent muttering,

‘Aye, and you might mind your mouth and no harm done.’

It was later that same summer that Miss Pettigrew left us, ‘under a cloud’ as they say. I could not understand it and Aunt Josephine refused to discuss the matter with me. I was furious. I stormed into Perdita’s room,

‘Why is Miss Pettigrew leaving? Do you know, Perdita, for if you do I demand you tell me?’

Perdita turned from the window seat where she had been contemplating the moor and the sea beyond,

‘Why should I know any more than you do?’ she said lazily, ‘I rather have the impression that it concerns a subject that is not quite suitable for a young lady’s ears.’

I could have shaken her,

‘What do you mean? How can you say such a thing about Miss Pettigrew and anyway, who on earth . . .’

‘I’m only guessing, just like you, Abby,’ she said, ‘but can you think of any other reason why Aunt Josephine would refuse to even discuss it with us?’

She was right, I couldn’t, but no more could I believe what that implied. I felt thoroughly miserable.

‘Oh, sit down, Abby, do, and stop looking so stricken. She was only a governess.’

‘You’re hateful, positively hateful,’ I cried, ‘she was our friend.’

‘Not mine,’ said Perdita, ‘she may have been yours but not mine.’

I looked at her. She was half turned towards the window and the light of the setting sun fell on her glossy black hair turning it to dark fire.

‘You never liked her, did you?’ I said.

‘No.’ She did not turn her head.

‘Perdita, who do you like?’ I said.

She turned this time and contemplated me calmly for a moment.

‘Those who like me,’ she said.

There was a long moment while we continued to hold our gaze, then she said,

‘Think on the bright side. Aunt Josephine says we need not have another governess. After all we are sixteen now and at last fit to be called ‘young ladies’. When did you last romp, Abby?’ she said and her eyes danced with mischief. I could no more

control the bubble of laughter that rose in my throat than could a thrush its song. I am ashamed to say that poor Miss Pettigrew was forgotten as we romped and pillow fought until a scandalised Aunt Josephine arrived to see what the commotion was. We narrowly escaped another governess thanks to Perdita's powers of persuasion but the scene stays in my mind as the moment I finally said goodbye to childhood.

I remembered Miss Pettigrew in my prayers that night and for many nights afterwards and I often wondered how she fared. Well, I hope; she had been a good friend to me.

It was strange to be alone together, the two of us. I don't think either of us had realised the way in which Miss Pettigrew had formed a bridge between us and it was almost like getting to know each other all over again. I was not so much in awe of Perdita as I had been when we were children although she still managed to get her own way most of the time. Our days were spent in feminine accomplishments like playing on the piano, sketching and painting, and of course riding which we both loved.

I could never keep up with Perdita of course. Moonfleet was far faster than my Princess and she would gallop off across the moor with never a backward glance. I would

always find her though stretched out on the turf, her back against a gravestone or simply wandering aimlessly around while Moonfleet cropped the grass. It was then that I felt closest to her. Her father was buried here, mine was somewhere at the bottom of the sea that crashed against the rocks not many yards away. She never mentioned her father and neither did I mine.

On one such occasion just after her eighteenth birthday I came upon her stretched out on a fallen tombstone, her hands crossed on her breast, her face serene. She opened an eye and regarded me wickedly,

‘What do you think, Abby? Does the pose suit me?’

‘How gruesome,’ I said, ‘get up at once or you’ll catch cold.’

We sat together, our backs against the warm stone of the crumbling church,

‘They’ll be home soon,’ she said.

I did not have to ask who she meant. Edmund and Sinclair had come down from Oxford the last summer and had been travelling in Europe since then. We had hardly seen anything of them since they had gone up to Oxford for they preferred to spend their holidays tramping around the globe with friends rather than stay dully at home. They would almost be strangers to us. We looked at each other and

smiled. This was another thing that brought us together. Almost in unison we said,

‘Our coming out ball,’ and we laughed.

This was to be our first season and the boys would be home.

I would soon be seeing Edmund once more. I wondered if he would have changed greatly or if he would find me changed. It was a year almost to the day since we had last seen Edmund and Sinclair, a year during which Perdita and I had grown into women and attractive ones at that if the sons of local families were to be believed. We made a striking pair, she so dark and I so fair. Edmund’s old names for us had never been more appropriate. I turned to look at Perdita. Her back was against the wall and her mouth was curved in a smile of sheer contentment, her eyes closed and her face turned up towards the sun.

‘Do you remember what Edmund used to call us,’ I said.

For a moment I thought she had not heard for she gave no sign, then she murmured,

‘Snow White and Rose Red, yes I remember.’

‘And do you remember how we acted out the fairy tale?’

‘And Sinclair said it was soft and sappy until we told him he could be the bear,’ her eyes were open now and dancing with merriment, ‘do you remember that awful old skin he got from somewhere . . .’

‘Moreton’s attics,’ I said, ‘there are hundreds of attics up there all stuffed with the strangest things.’

‘Yes, some bloodthirsty ancestor of his had shot it. Ugh, how it smelled.’

‘Moth-eaten and totally disgusting,’ I said. ‘He was in his element charging around growling and snarling. Just like Sinclair.’

‘He scared you half to death with it though,’ she said, ‘you really did think it was a bear for a moment. I can remember your expression quite clearly.’

‘Nonsense,’ I protested, ‘he didn’t fool me for a minute.’

She tilted her head to one side,

‘If you say so,’ she said.

‘I don’t suppose Sinclair has changed,’ I said, refusing to argue the point.

She rose in one graceful movement and stood with her back towards the sun looking down at me.

‘Sinclair will never change,’ she said, ‘there’s no hope for him.’

I laughed at the mock tone of doom she had used and took the outstretched hand she offered me.

‘He never would be the prince,’ I said, ‘do you remember? When we came to the part when the bear had to change back into a handsome prince he always made Edmund take over.’

Perdita smiled,

‘Much more fitting, don’t you think?’

There it was again, that smile contented and yes, satisfied, like the cat that got the cream and something more, something almost secretive about it.

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There was a sharp, rhythmical banging sound and her smile seemed to linger in the air before me like the Cheshire cat’s in the book by Mr Lewis Carroll. I felt dizzy. I could still feel the warmth of the sun on my face and hear the echoes of my own laughter ringing in my ears but I was no longer up on the moor by the ruined church. I looked around. I was in the rose room. I dragged myself back into the present with difficulty. I was still seated at the little escritoire and I started as something soft and black brushed against my hand. It was the black veiling on my hat stirring and moving in the wind that came through the now wide open window. I rose hurriedly and caught the window frame before it could bang once more against the wall. I fastened the catch and watched as the veil subsided and lay still.

I turned back towards the window. The light was fading and the wind was gusting up on the moors. The figure that thundered

on galloping hooves up there so near to the cliff edge was only a black shape against the lowering sky. I sighed and drew the heavy warm curtains against the gathering darkness and the moor and Sinclair Rothwell riding out his own particular devil. I felt cold and cramped and in my hand was clutched the packet of papers which bore my name.