

HELEN MAGEE



MASTER OF DRYFORD

Complete and Unabridged

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MASTER OF DRYFORD

Felicia found the strength to escape from her evil stepfather. But, without money or position, how could a single girl win the struggle to be independent in Victorian England? Then, a chance meeting with the debonair Charles brings Felicia to Dryford as governess. But the ancient family home is overshadowed by mystery, and she has to earn the trust of her new family before dramatic events reveal to her the whole truth — and her love for the Master of Dryford.

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It was in the last rays of the setting sun that I first saw the keep from which Keep Dryford takes its name and I treasure the memory for I will never see it again. It was oddly comforting though a little frightening looming black and solid against the sky which flamed blood-red behind it and I felt at once a sense of peace at its timelessness and a thrill of fear at the violence it had seen in its time.

I was running away, escaping my past, and beside me stood the man who had made it possible. Behind me was fear but I did not think of that as I watched the sun slide from the sky and the dark outline of the Keep soften and merge into the dusk, or the gloaming as it is known here in Scotland. All I thought was that here was a new beginning, here I would be safe from threats and terror and fear but I could not have known how wrong I was. For me the fears were only just beginning. And perhaps that's where I should start — right at the very beginning . . .

* * *

My childhood was a happy one. My parents, though not wealthy, were not poor either and I remember with affection the small Queen Anne house on the outskirts of London with its lawns sweeping down to the river. It was a long time before I was able to connect that much-loved stretch of water at the bottom of our garden with the majestic expanse of the Thames that I gazed at in awe on our infrequent visits to the great city. I remember the excitement of those visits. The great shops of Bond Street lit by gas jets and so splendid that they seemed like palaces to me, the stalls in the streets where in winter you could buy a bag of roasted chestnuts which warmed your hands as well as tasting strange and delicious. The flower-sellers in summer from whom Father would always buy a posy for Mother. The hiss of steam and the smell of the great railway station, the noise and clamour as the train pulled in seeming to my childish eyes like a huge dragon; and the journey home again, half-asleep with the wonder of it all and always, at the journey's end home, never changing, safe and comforting. It seemed to me then that nothing could ever change. There seemed always to be laughter in my life, my mother's sparkling like the river on a sunny day, my father's full-throated and deep like the dark river pools. I don't

remember my father so very clearly now, only strong brown hands and laughing eyes as he swung me up in his arms and I seemed to touch the clouds or held me close to him when a childish nightmare disturbed my dreams. They called me Felicia which means happiness, and they taught me by their lives the meaning of the word.

My mother was devastated when he died. I remember she seemed to shrink a little as if without his energy and strength she somehow became less of a person. I was ten at the time and for the next year I watched as the mother I had known became more fragile, more vulnerable. Even the pretty colour seemed to drain out of her cheeks and it was not just that she was wearing black. It was more than that. Father had been her strength and she was quite simply lost without him. But even I did not realise the extent of her grief, not until a year after Father's death when she came out of mourning.

I was playing in the garden when Mrs Larkin came to fetch me.

'You're wanted in the small sitting room. Miss Felicia,' she said.

I looked up at her. Mrs Larkin was a small rotund woman who always seemed to breathe cheerfulness and good sense, but her face was almost grim as she spoke. She and

her husband had looked after us as long as I could remember, she as cook housekeeper and he as gardener and odd-job man. I had never seen her look so stern.

‘Why, what’s the matter?’ I said.

Her lips pursed up in a thin line as she said,

‘That’s not for me to say. Your Mama wants to see you so come along and don’t go upsetting her, poor woman, as if she didn’t have troubles enough.’

She went on in this vein as we walked towards the house but even the unusual severity of her manner did nothing to prepare me for what was to come.

Mother was sitting on the sofa when I entered the room,

‘My darling, Felicia,’ she said drawing me into her arms, ‘I have some grave news.’

She looked up pleadingly at a tall thin man standing behind her. I had barely noticed him as I came into the room but I looked at him now and I did not like him. With all the stubborn prejudice of a child I hated him on sight. He looked down at her. His long thin face with its dead eyes and side whiskers made me shiver though I still stood within the circle of my mother’s arms.

‘The child must know, my dear,’ he said. ‘She is not an infant.’

I turned to my mother. There were tears on her long lashes and her mouth trembled as she spoke to me.

‘My love, the house will have to be sold.’ I was stunned. The house. My home. The only one I had ever known. The river at the edge of the lawns. The tree where Father had hung a swing for me, so long ago it seemed to me then. His study where I could still go and curl up in his chair and smell that familiar tobacco smell, where I could imagine I could hear his voice, his laugh. I clung to her. She was still speaking, explaining in words I could barely take in that we had no money. I was bewildered. Never before had either of my parents spoken to me of money. Never before had it even entered my head to think of it. I remember saying in wonder,

‘Money?’, as if it were a word in a foreign language, then he spoke again.

‘The reason, my dear. The child must know the reason,’ and for the first time I felt his cold eyes on me and shivered.

She looked up at him again and her voice was a whisper.

‘No, you cannot. She is only a child.’

He bent over her and she seemed to shrink from him. ‘If you do not then I will,’ he said.

She ran her tongue over dry lips. The tears were flowing freely now. ‘Your father,’ she said, ‘your dear father . . .’

‘Leonora,’ the voice was hard and she flinched.

‘He left us very badly off,’ she continued. ‘There were debts that we cannot pay.’ She faltered to a halt and held me to her. ‘Oh, my darling, I am so sorry, so sorry.’

Then a hand gripped my arm. I looked at it as if it were some curious object in a museum. There were long black hairs on the back of it and underneath the skin was white and smooth. I looked up at the face so close to mine. There were hairs growing out of the nostrils and his lips were very full and very red. Behind them his teeth were long and pointed. Like a wolf, I thought, and suddenly into my mind came the thought of my father sitting me on his knee, his hands brown and square and his laughing eyes looking into mine as he told me the story of Red Riding Hood. He was speaking,

‘Your father was a gambler, Felicia, a gambler, do you hear? He lost your house, your security, your future on the turn of a card. You have nothing now. Nothing but the clothes you wear. Everything else will have to be sold. Your father died a bankrupt,’ he almost spat out the last word. The face came nearer, the teeth gleamed sharply and I thought, he’s going to eat me up.

It was then that I began to scream. I kicked at his shins and tore myself away. I took one

last look at the hideous face and even my mother's arms could not stay me as I ran out of the house and down the garden to the hollow tree that had been my refuge in time of trouble — when a favourite doll was broken or a bird was found dead on the lawn. But this was worse than a broken doll or a dead bird. This was my home, my life, all I had known. I had not understood all he had been saying. I did not know what bankrupt meant but I had understood that my life as I had known it was over and I had understood that he had been telling me that my father was wicked and *that* I would never believe. He was the wicked one with his wolf's teeth and his cold eyes. I knew my fairy-tales. I knew that bad people always told lies about good people so I sat in my hiding place and I hated him with all my strength and as I rubbed the tears fiercely out of my eyes I wondered what his punishment would be for, child that I was, I still believed in fairytales.

If I was unhappy then, it was nothing to the waves of fear and loneliness that engulfed me when my mother eventually came to me. God knows how she had persuaded him to let her come alone, but she had. My eyes were dry. I had no more tears and she put her arms around me. Her face was white and her eyes huge with a fear that I know now was as great as mine.

‘Felicia,’ she said, ‘there is one more thing you have to know.’ I looked at her. I could feel nothing. Her voice trembled as she said it. ‘That man. The man you have just met. His name is Mr Petheridge and I am going to marry him.’

That was the end of my childhood. I was eleven years old when I grew up. Mr Petheridge was a good man, my mother said. He had helped her through the last year, paid our household bills, settled outstanding debts. She was greatly indebted to him. He did good works among the poor. He was a lay preacher with a small private income. She told me these things with a pale set face and I understood. She needed someone to look after her. She was a widow with no money, no home and a child to care for. It seemed to me later that I did all my growing up in that single afternoon while the bees hummed lazily in the long grass by the water’s edge and inside I was still screaming for my father.

So we left our beautiful home and went to live with Mr Petheridge in an ugly red brick house in London where Mr Petheridge ran our lives with a rod of iron and his sour-faced sister kept house. She had iron grey hair scraped back into a bun and her face was mottled. I never saw her smile. For three years I watched my mother fade and wither until she died, from

despair I suppose, and I was left alone in an ugly house with ugly people. I was fourteen and I knew that he had killed my mother. He had bought her and he had killed her.

When she died my formal education stopped. I had always been 'good at my books' as Mrs Larkin used to put it and I found out very quickly that this talent for learning was a valuable weapon in my armoury against my stepfather. I was sent to a dingy day school for the 'daughters of gentlefolk' from which I would have emerged as ignorant as I arrived had it not been for him. He took great delight in setting me tests of knowledge and his scorn was poured unceasingly on me when I failed to meet the impossibly-high standard he set for me. It was not long before I realised that he did this to torture my mother who could not bear to see my misery at his taunts. Fragile though she was, she had a spirit that evaded him and that he knew he could never possess. So I scoured the meagre shelves of the school for books and tormented my inadequate teachers with my thirst for knowledge, spending long hours in my room poring over books when I should have been asleep until he could no longer reduce me to quivering inadequacy with his slights and between us grew up a hatred so strong that it frightened me with its intensity.

Even now I can hardly bear to think of the next four years, the years that followed my mother's death. I helped Miss Petheridge in the house, eking out the meagre allowance my stepfather made; I wore my hair scraped back from my face and secured it as best I could in the unbecoming bun that he insisted on. It was a major source of contention with him, my hair, for I had inherited my looks from my father and it sprang away from my face in a torrent of dark waves. I used to sit by the light of my candle at night and let it fall over my shoulders and brush it. It was my best feature, that and the eyes that would become liquid as I thought of the happiness I had once enjoyed and would grow stormy and cold as I thought of my poor mother's last years. But during the day my hair was scraped back and I went in fear lest a single strand should escape for I would be accused of shameful vanity and worse and my stepfather would mouth at me until I shook from the violence of it. I had learned to shut my ears to what he said but his eyes hypnotised me as a snake does a rabbit. The hairstyle suited me well enough for I had nothing to recommend me. I was too thin and my face was pale and pinched and the clothes I wore, of heavy dark material, did nothing to enhance my appearance.

I used to slip out as often as I could to see the Larkins. They had been dismissed of course when Mother married Mr Petheridge but they too had come to London. Mr Larkin had got a job as manager of a small private hotel not far from where we lived, due more to Mrs Larkin's excellent cooking than to his managerial skills. Whilst mother was alive they had kept in touch by letter for their few attempts to visit her had been sharply discouraged by my stepfather. I had got into the habit of slipping round there on my way home from school when I knew my stepfather would be late home but now that I had left school it was becoming increasingly difficult to avoid him. Mrs Larkin always made us a pot of tea and gave me hot buttered muffins, shaking her head over how thin I had become.

'It's feeding up you want, Miss Felicia,' she would say and, one day, her head on one side and sympathy in her eyes, 'Such a pretty girl and such a waste. Still he's a good man, I suppose. It's the Lord's work he does.'

Mr Larkin guffawed, 'Lord's work!'

'Hush now, Larkin, she's only a child,' chided Mrs Larkin.

At the time I wondered what Mr Larkin meant. I know now. They were the only ones who showed me sympathy and even a little laughter during those long years and

I looked forward to the visits I managed to pay them.

It was when I was sixteen that I was told I had to help my stepfather in his work. I knew he worked among the poor of the city but the nature of the work he did was uncertain. I saw a different London then — a London filled with poverty and want, so different from the pretty city I had known with my parents and yet there was beauty there too in some measure. The people he went amongst, dispensing food and lectures, for the most part gave not a fig for him or for me either. We were looked on with mistrust, the things we brought taken from necessity. I would grow hot with embarrassment as I stood behind him while he lectured some poor woman, her children clinging to her skirts in fear of his voice, on the value of thrift and honesty. He would never give them money.

‘Money,’ he would say to me, ‘is only a temptation to them. They spend it on drink while their children go hungry and barefoot or worse still,’ and he leaned towards me, ‘they gamble, and you know what that leads to, do you not, Felicia?’

It was a perpetual theme with him. Gambling was the greatest sin, the worst kind of evil and he never let me forget what my father’s gambling had done to us.

He was right in a way, of course. As I grew older I began to understand more about my father. I remembered the evenings he would come home lit up as if from inside with a glow that would warm us all and there would be a celebration, a special treat — a new hat for Mother or a pretty frock for me. There would also be the evenings he arrived back, his step leaden and all the light gone from his eyes and sometimes, just occasionally, a piece of silver or a particularly nice china figurine would disappear from my mother's collection. I asked her about it once when I noticed that one of her favourite pieces had gone.

‘Oh, I never really liked that figurine so very much and your father's business needs a little extra just at the moment.’

But I knew she had loved it and that it had been a very valuable piece. Oddly enough I never knew what my father's ‘business’ was. I suspect there was none. Even my stepfather never enlightened me about that, only about the horrors of gambling. If he was trying to make me hate gambling as he did then he did not succeed. If anything it made me more sympathetic towards the gambler for I also understood by then that a gambler is as incapable of stopping as the world is from turning and if I had to choose between my dear adorable laughing father and this

creature of evil who was supposed to be so good then I welcomed the gambling.

It was not until the night of my eighteenth birthday that I realised just how evil he was. I was sitting by the light of my candle brushing my hair and wondering what the future held for me. It was so bleak all of a sudden that I laid my head on my arms and began to cry, not for the future but for the fact that my eighteenth birthday had gone unnoticed in that house. The tears welled-up and spilled over and my sobs prevented me from hearing the door open. It was not until a hand was laid on my shoulder that I realised I was not alone. I turned my head and saw it lying there, pale and smooth with black hairs so close that my breath disturbed them. I could feel the clammy sweat of the hand through the thin cotton of my nightgown and I was afraid. I looked up and I would have screamed but the breath caught in my throat as I saw his face. It leered at me and the eyes glittered in the dim light. I saw it move even closer to me, the lips parting, and there were those long pointed teeth, only this time I did not think — ‘he is going to eat me up’ — as I had done when a child. I knew what it was he wanted even before he said.

‘You’re eighteen now, Felicia. Not a child any more.’

His eyes were on mine, hypnotising me as they had always done but I felt strangely removed from the scene.

Into my mind came the picture of the poor women he helped and of one in particular. She could not have been any older than me and she stood there before him in her grim hovel, a younger brother and sister pale from hunger clinging to her tattered skirt as he pressed money into her hands and said,

‘I will return later this evening to see that the money is well spent.’

I had stood there, uncomprehending, thinking only that he never gave them money but the girl’s face rose once again before my eyes and I knew now that she had understood though I had not. I felt sick with disgust then another thought blotted out everything else and I said,

‘Oh, my poor mother.’

It was as if I had struck him. His eyes were black, his skin livid and the ugly red lips curled back from those sharp teeth. His hands came up and wound themselves around my throat like great white snakes, his face was no more than an inch from mine. My mind snapped back and I opened my mouth to scream for help when a voice sounded like a whiplash in the room,

‘Stop it.’

His eyes lost their glazed look and his hands slid from around my throat. I could not move. He turned aside and in the doorway I saw Miss Petheridge. She looked so comical in her calico nightgown, her hair in a plait down her back, that I wondered why I was not laughing.

‘Go back to bed,’ she said to her brother.

That was all but she said it in a voice like iron. He looked at her for a moment and went without a word. I turned to Miss Petheridge. She was looking closely at me and for the first time I saw sympathy in her eyes, then she too turned and left me without a word. She was right. There was nothing to say. I knew what I had to do. I sat huddled on the bed and waited. As soon as dawn began to break over the city I got up and packed my belongings into a valise, then I crept downstairs and out of the silent house. I had only one place to go and I went there.

Mrs Larkin was shocked to see me so early. She bustled about making tea.

‘My dear, you look so ill. What can have happened?’ I couldn’t tell her of course so I merely said,

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Larkin but I couldn’t stay there any longer and I had nowhere else to go.’ I added inconsequentially, ‘I’m eighteen now.’

She looked long and hard at me, then said,

‘Quite right, my dear. It’s no life for a young girl living with two dry old sticks like that and not even related so to speak. You just get your breakfast down you and into bed. You look as if you haven’t slept for a week.’

My lips were dry as I said, ‘What if he comes looking for me?’

Mr Larkin drew himself up. He looked so big and kind and comfortable.

‘Just let him try, my dear. Don’t you worry about that.’

I felt safe again and it was lovely to be tucked up in a warm bed with a hot brick wrapped in flannel at my feet and Mrs Larkin’s smiling face nodding at me.

He did come for me that week but I didn’t see him. Mr Larkin dealt with him. I overheard their conversation later outside my room when they thought I was asleep.

‘Threatened to get the police, he did,’ said Mr Larkin indignantly, ‘Police, I said. It’s me that’ll be getting the police to you and no mistake about it if I see you round here again.’

Mrs Larkin drew in her breath. ‘What did he say to that?’

Mr Larkin’s voice was gruff.

‘Made some threats about hotel managers having to be respectable and a word in the right ear could put us on the streets . . .’

I heard Mrs Larkin give a sharp cry then Mr Larkin again,

‘Now don’t you worry yourself m’dear. I just told him that his sister wouldn’t be too pleased to know he’d been round here and he went off with his tail between his legs. From what young Miss Felicia has said over the years I had a notion that would do the trick and it did. Seems she’s the only one that can keep him in hand.’

I heard them go off down the stairs, Mr Larkin’s voice still comforting and I lay there and wondered if I had done the right thing in coming to them or if I would just bring them trouble. And what did he mean ‘respectable’? There was no more respectable couple in the world than the Larkins. As the weeks passed, however, and there was no sign of my stepfather I soon forgot the incident and set myself the task of making myself useful to the Larkins.

The next year was like an awakening for me. I had a good head for figures so not only did I help Mrs Larkin in the kitchen and in the hotel but I also got Mr Larkin’s books in order.

‘Well, my dear,’ he said to me one day, ‘with your head for business we might even make this place pay.’

I laughed for I knew the place paid quite well but the books had indeed been in a

terrible state and I had been useful. It was an odd place, their little hotel. The guests were mostly business-men from other parts of the country who liked the homely atmosphere and the good food that came out of Mrs Larkin's kitchen and of course it had an added attraction. I don't know when I first discovered it but Mrs Larkin broached the subject one day as we were hulling strawberries.

'The little room at the back, my dear,' she said tentatively.

'I know it,' I said and suddenly I heard myself adding, 'It's a gaming room, isn't it?'

She flushed a little and looked embarrassed, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

'I didn't think you'd realised.'

'I only just have, Mrs Larkin, and to think that all this time I've been living in a gambling den, a place of vice and immorality.'

She looked up at me and twinkled again as she saw that I was laughing.

'There now, and who'd have thought that you'd be able to laugh about that. You surely are improving, my dear, and looking very pretty if I may say so since you stopped scraping your hair back in that silly old bun.'

I laughed again and caught sight of myself in the mirror over the dresser. I did look

almost pretty with my usually pale cheeks flushed from the heat of the kitchen and my hair waving around my face and caught into a loose chignon on top of my head. The prettily coloured clothes I now wore helped as well and my grey eyes took colour from the things I wore. I put my arms round the woman and hugged her.

‘I do love you, Mrs Larkin.’

She pushed me away but she was pleased nonetheless.

‘Go on now, we’ll never get these strawberries done and there’s a special evening this evening with high stakes.’ And she winked. I felt very conspiratorial, then a thought struck me.

‘Mrs Larkin,’ I said, ‘when I first came here, you remember my stepfather came to take me back?’

She nodded, her lips pursed, so I went on,

‘I overheard you and Mr Larkin talking after he’d gone. Mr Larkin was saying that my stepfather had threatened him. Something to do with respectability. Was it the gaming room he was talking about?’

Mrs Larkin nodded again.

‘You see, my dear, a small hotel like this doesn’t bring in very much if you’re only the manager and the gaming room brings in that little extra that makes all the difference.’

‘And the gaming room is against the law?’
She stopped what she was doing and turned to me, unusually serious.

‘Well, it is and it isn’t,’ she said. ‘You see, if it was just a few guests having a quiet game of cards or some such then that would be all right but we very often have gentlemen who aren’t guests in the hotel and some of them like to play for high stakes so I can’t say it’s strictly legal.’

‘And my stepfather was threatening to tell the owners of the hotel?’ I said.

Mrs Larkin laughed.

‘Oh, the owners know all right, my dear. They take half the profits from it. No, it’s the police he was going to tell and then the owners would say they knew nothing about it and Larkin and I would be out of a job.’

‘But that’s unfair!’ I cried.

She shrugged,

‘Life’s unfair, my dear. It was part of the job when Larkin took over the hotel. He knew it was take it or leave it.’

‘And if the authorities get to know it’ll be you who suffer?’

She patted my hand. ‘Now don’t you go worrying yourself. Nobody’s going to get to know about it. It’s very quiet and very select. Why, even you didn’t know it was going on all these months and you’ve been living here.’

I saw that she was right. The entrance to the little room at the back was separate from the main hotel entrance and it must indeed be run very quietly, but I still felt very humble when I realised what a risk they were taking keeping me here after the threats made by Mr Petheridge.

It was some weeks later that Mr Larkin took ill. It was nothing, he said, but he looked quite grey and Mrs Larkin packed him off to bed. She looked worried.

‘It’s an important evening in the gaming room,’ she said softly to me as we came downstairs, ‘a private function and we’d been hoping to build these kind of evenings into a regular thing. That’s why Larkin’s so worried.’

Mr Larkin always handled the money on these occasions, sitting behind a desk on a dais at one end of the room and looking very important and superior in his stiff shirt and buttonhole as he exchanged money for chips and paid out the winnings.

‘I’ll do it, Mrs Larkin,’ I said. ‘You know I’m good with figures.’

She looked shocked.

‘You’ll do no such thing, a young lady of good breeding. It’s no place for you.’

I wore her down eventually for there was no one else to take Mr Larkin’s place and that evening I came downstairs ready

to take my place behind the great desk. I was wearing my most sophisticated gown. It was of grey watered silk and had a high frilled collar and sleeves to the wrist. Colours flashed from it as the silk caught the light and were reflected in my eyes.

‘Well now, don’t you look a treat,’ said Mrs Larkin.

‘And perfectly respectable too, Mrs Larkin, so you need have no fears.’

The gaming room was a blaze of light as I entered, and if Ben, the doorman, thought it odd that I should preside for the evening he made no comment but bowed me to my place as if I were royalty. My appearance caused a stir throughout the room and I saw several appreciative looks cast in my direction. My legs felt unsteady as I stood up to explain the absence of Mr Larkin but the room was not large and my voice carried easily through it. As I spoke I was amused to notice the speculative gleam die out of eyes here and there and was glad of my ‘lady’s’ voice and manner for I knew that to be here, a lone woman, presiding over a company of men engaged in games of chance would cause eyebrows to be raised even in the most advanced of drawing rooms.

I sat down and the evening’s proceedings began. I was nervous but running under the nervousness was a thin thread of

excitement that came to me from the floor of the room — the thrill of chance. I shivered as it seemed to touch me and I knew my cheeks were bright with excitement. As I looked across the room I noticed a man watching me. He was tall and broad, his fair hair striking against the dark cloth of his evening clothes. He bowed and smiled and his face was so open, so laughing, that I was reminded swiftly of my father and a tiny flame of joy leapt up in me. I smiled back and bowed in turn then my attention was required for my duties.

The evening was well advanced when it happened. There was a scuffle at the door and I looked up. It was my stepfather. I watched motionless as he advanced towards me until his face filled the whole of my vision. I felt sick. I tried to stand but my legs would not support me. He was mouthing at me, shouting obscenities. I put my hands to my ears to stop myself hearing but I could not help it. All around people were standing or sitting stock-still, their faces turned towards us.

‘Like father, like daughter,’ he was shouting, ‘and worse more likely in a place like this. She’s gone now. My sister. My keeper,’ his face was thrust into mine as he said with great deliberation, ‘she cannot keep me away from you any more. I’ll not let

you rest, Felicia, my lovely Felicia. We shall see how you compare with your mother.’ And one of those horrible hands came up and touched my hair. I remember thinking — he is mad, quite mad. Then suddenly there was another figure there. I saw the fair head, heard the muttered oath as he swung my stepfather round by his coat collar and cast him to the floor like so much debris. Then I fled.

I had no idea where I was going. I only know that I ran from the room and into the street and did not stop until I could no longer go on. I leaned against what I thought was a wall and stumbled, grasping it for support, but it was not a wall, it was the parapet of a bridge. Below me the waters of the Thames slid past in a pale sheet. It looked so calm, so peaceful. I suddenly felt very tired. The parapet was quite low and I put my hands flat on top of it. I thought of my stepfather and the fact that his sister was, presumably, dead since she was no longer there to keep him from me. I thought of the Larkins and the trouble he would make for them now. I pushed myself out. I felt the air cool on my cheeks, saw the water shining, inviting. Then my arm was gripped in a hand like steel and I was pulled away, back onto solid ground.

‘You little fool,’ said a voice and I looked up into the face of the fair man. I felt faint. I remember saying,

‘It looked so calm, so quiet,’ and then I must indeed have fainted.

When I opened my eyes it was to feel a man’s arms around me and I began to tremble violently.

‘Hush now,’ said a voice very gently and I looked up into the face of the stranger. I tried to speak but no words would come so he picked me up as if I weighed no more than a feather and carried me back to the hotel.

I don’t remember exactly how many days I kept to my bed, only that each day the stranger came to visit, bringing small gifts of flowers or sweets when he came. At first I was silent, listening as he spoke to me, but gradually I began to talk and somehow with him it was not difficult to speak of the fear I had of my stepfather and the life I had led. I found that I was able to tell him all the things I had been unable to tell the Larkins and for the first time in many years I felt clean, purged of all those dreadful memories. His eyes were full of sympathy but laughter was never far from the surface and soon he had me laughing too. His name was Charles Allingham, and he was in London on behalf of his brother’s business affairs.

I heard snatches of conversation between him and the Larkins outside my door.

‘She is much distressed by what has happened.’ This was Charles.

‘Indeed sir and it’s no wonder. The man is a fiend and I understand his sister is no longer alive or he would be kept in check,’ replied Mrs Larkin.

And again,

‘He hates her, sir. It’s his pleasure to make people afraid of him and she has always stood out against him in her way. I remember when he first came to the house after her mother died. Her poor mother, what could she do with a child and nothing to live on?’

And once,

‘Would she be agreeable, do you think?’

‘Well, sir, it certainly seems a solution and the family is well known. You go ahead and write to your brother.’

All this I heard but took little notice of. I had got up and was sitting in the little parlour one morning when he arrived. I was still pale but he could bring the colour to my cheeks with his fun and nonsense. I rose to greet him.

‘You spend far too much of your time coming to visit me.’

He took my hand in both of his and looked into my face. Laughter danced behind his eyes.

‘This is true, Felicia, but then London is so dull at this time of year. It’s either you or Kew Gardens, and flowers make me sneeze.’

I laughed up at him. ‘You must have completed your business by now.’

He was suddenly serious. ‘Yes, and that’s why I’ve come.’

He drew me to a chair and made me sit. ‘Felicia, I am not happy leaving you in London.’

I shivered in spite of the warmth of the room. Fear of meeting my stepfather had made me keep to the hotel and I had not realised how much I depended on Charles’s visits, not only for the pleasure of his company but from the sense of safety that I felt knowing that he was in London. The thought of his leaving filled me with dread. But he was still speaking.

‘I have spoken to the Larkins and they have agreed that you should no longer remain here.’

I was shocked. ‘But where would I go?’

He smiled. ‘That is what I wanted to talk to you about.’ He drew his chair closer. ‘I have told you of my home at Dryford?’

I nodded. He had described what sounded a lovely old house in the Scottish Borders, where he lived with his brother and nephew. Keep Dryford, it was called and I had teased

him about being a Border Reiver. I did so again and he smiled.

‘Not me,’ he said, ‘I’m the English brother. Very respectable.’

He looked down at his hands then up again, before I could ask him what he meant.

‘My brother’s wife has been ill. She has been away from home for some time but is expected back quite soon. The child is still young, only eight, and needs someone to look after him. Also he needs some schooling. His nurse, who was our nurse too, will be kept busy looking after my brother’s wife once she comes home so you see, there is a place for you there if you wish it.’

My hand still rested in his and I looked up at him.

‘Leave the Larkins?’ I said.

‘For a new life,’ he answered. His gaze was very steady. I was confused.

‘I shall need time to think about it,’ I said.

‘Of course, but not too much time, Felicia. If you do decide to come it would be better if you travelled with me.’

‘When do you leave?’ I asked.

He looked a little rueful. ‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘or at the latest the day after. I really should have been home some days ago.’

I was immediately contrite. 'And you stayed just to come and see me?'

He laughed. 'Oh, London has many pleasures,' he said. 'Don't go thinking you're its only attraction.'

I laughed, feeling easier, then I thought of the risk to the Larkins' security if I stayed with them. My stepfather would not let them rest as long as I was here. All at once my mind was made up.

'I'll come,' I said.

The Larkins, though sorry to see me go, were pleased at the way things had turned out.

'It's more fitting for a young lady than what you're doing here, Miss Felicia,' said Mrs Larkin.

'You'll be all right there,' said Mr Larkin. 'I have a letter from Mr Allingham's brother, and he seems a proper gentleman.'

'Oh, Mr Larkin,' I said, 'did you ask for a testimonial?'

'Indeed I did, my dear, as is only right and proper.'

He showed me the letter and it was indeed extremely proper. It referred to me throughout as 'the young person' and made it quite clear that as he had not met me the position would be reviewed after a month to the 'satisfaction of both parties'.

‘Good gracious,’ I said, ‘he sounds quite fierce.’

‘He’s quite right, my dear,’ said Mrs Larkin, ‘he has a child’s welfare to consider and that’s no light matter.’

I felt suitably chastened, then my attention was caught by the sprawling signature. I could not make it out but one thing was certain. It was not Allingham. I remembered Charles’s reference to his being the ‘English brother’ and I determined to ask him about it.

I got the opportunity next day on the long train journey north.

‘Why is your brother’s name different to yours?’ Charles smiled.

‘He’s actually my half-brother. Same mother, different fathers. He’s a few years older than me.’

‘Is that why you call yourself the English brother?’

‘Yes, my mother was a Scot but my father was English. Lachlan on the other hand is pure Scot.’

‘Lachlan,’ I repeated. ‘That’s a strange name.’

‘Och aye, lassie, it’s no’ sae strange whaur you’re gaun,’ he said in a travesty of a Scots accent and I laughed.

‘Tell me about him,’ I said, ‘this Lachlan,’ and the word sounded strange on my lips,

‘and about Keep Dryford. That doesn’t sound so terribly Scottish.’

Charles leaned back and began to speak.

‘It is in Scotland but only just. The land round about was fought over for centuries by those Border Reivers you seem to find so romantic, though I don’t think it could have been as romantic as you think. Dryford was razed to the ground several times in the course of history and had to be rebuilt. The present house is only about two hundred years old. It’s built inside a loop of the River Tweed, for defence I suppose, hence the name. Before the estate bridges were built there was only one access to it. The Grants have lived there for generations. It came to Lachlan through my mother’s family. As heir he took the family name for his own.’

‘So his father’s name was different again?’

Charles smiled.

‘Confusing, isn’t it? But mother was the last of the Grants and she held the estate in trust for the elder son.’

‘And didn’t your father mind, his son not taking his name?’

‘Not my father, Lachlan’s,’ Charles corrected me. ‘My father was an Allingham from Sussex. I didn’t know Lachlan’s father, of course; he died when Lachlan was very young so I don’t know if he minded or not,

but Keep Dryford could never belong to anyone other than a Grant.'

'So you . . .'

'Will never be Master of Keep Dryford,' he finished for me. 'No the next Master will be Alexander, Lachlan's son. I am merely the poor half-brother.'

I was on the point of laughing at his dramatic view of himself when I noticed the tightness about his mouth.

'Does it hurt?' I asked gently.

He smiled and the tightness was gone.

'The plight of the younger brother is rather too common to be of much interest, Felicia. Let's just say it irritates me sometimes.'

'What was he like, your father?' I said.

'As unlike Lachlan's I gather as it was possible to be and, I suspect, a great deal more fun.'

'And your mother, she was happy with both?'

He considered this.

'I think my mother was rather like one of those strange creatures you see at the Zoological Gardens. A chameleon, it's called. It changes the colour of its skin depending on its background. I've no reason to believe she was not happy with both.'

The tightness about his mouth was returning so I did not pursue the point.

'Your brother, what's he like?'

He laughed. 'Like our fathers, he is as unlike me as it is possible to be. Very worthy.'

I laughed too. 'Then I shall not like him at all.'

He looked serious then, and took my hand.

'Oh, but you must, Felicia, for if you did not then you might go away, and I should be heartbroken.'

I felt my heart give a little leap then I noticed the twinkle at the back of his eyes and scolded him.

'Can you never be serious?'

'Never,' he said.

I asked him about his brother's wife but he was strangely evasive.

'It's an odd situation,' he said, 'and not a very happy one. She was much upset by the death of her sister last year and has been only recently back to their family home in Italy where the accident happened. I'm not quite sure when she is expected at Dryford.'

'She is Italian then?' I said in surprise.

He nodded. 'Yes, we were all somewhat surprised at Lachlan's choice.' He looked out of the window at the passing countryside and I barely heard his words as he said, 'I wonder if he is regretting it now,' then he turned to me smiling and said,

‘Now who else can I tell you about? Oh, yes, Alexander, the child. He’s eight now and an exact replica of his father. Very serious.’ He pulled a face at me and I laughed.

‘Then he should not be troublesome.’

‘I shouldn’t count on that, Felicia, he’s rather an odd child in some ways but you must judge for yourself.’ He went on, ‘And then of course there’s Araminta.’

‘Araminta?’ I repeated.

Charles was looking out of the window again at the rolling hills.

‘A sort of cousin of Lachlan’s. She’s not yet eighteen and he’s her guardian. She’s an orphan as well as an heiress so you see he does have a highly-developed sense of duty,’ and he gave a little laugh. ‘You will find that my dear half-brother is something of a paragon, Felicia.’

‘He sounds extremely dull,’ I said.

He gave me a quick look and smiled.

‘Oh, Felicia, I shall so enjoy you being at Dryford.’

I felt my cheeks flush with pleasure at his words and encouraged him to speak further of what I should find there, and I heard of the old nurse Dorcas who had been with the family since Lachlan was a baby; of a brother and sister called Sutherland who were living not far from Keep Dryford; of old Redpath — man of all work and the source

of much folklore. When he had finished detailing the household I said,

‘Quite a large house then?’

‘I’m sure you’ll find us very provincial after London,’ he teased.

I looked at him closely.

‘Do you like living at Dryford, Charles?’ I asked.

For a moment I thought he would not answer, then he said, ‘My dear, I have no choice.’ And there was a bitter twist to his mouth.

He seemed disinclined for conversation after that so I turned my attention to the scenery flying past outside. The neat fields of the South had long since given way to rolling hills and then to what seemed to me mountains. I had never seen such country. Even the air seemed sharper, clearer somehow and with an edge to it though we were in high summer. After the stuffiness of London I found it invigorating. And so I sat at the window and wondered what was in front of me and thought of all that had gone before and the events that had led me to Keep Dryford.