

The Chatelaine

The Rochford Trilogy

Claire

LORRIMER



Part 1

1864–1896

*“And fair the violet’s gentle drooping head, The
primrose, pale for love uncomfited . . .”*

Oscar Wilde, *Ravenna*



Prologue

1864

Fourteen times a day the children's nurse, Irene, stood for ten minutes in the centre of the sickroom waving her rod through the air. On the end of the rod was a three foot square of flannel cloth moistened in Sir William Burnett's Disinfecting Fluid – a patented purifying agent. Doctor Forbes thought very highly of it and had recommended it yesterday as a precaution lest the two infants were suffering from an infectious disease. But this morning the younger doctor had informed the anxious nurse and parents that in his opinion, the likelihood was that the baby and the little girl were suffering from brain storms.

It was four o'clock on a dark December evening. An oil lamp, turned low, stood on the table between the baby's cot and that of her eighteen month-old sister. There could be little doubt now that the two month-old baby was dying. She was wracked by convulsive fits, her tiny body contorting grotesquely as she struggled for breath. Beside her, Alice Rochford wept quietly, powerless to help her offspring. Every now and again she turned in mute appeal to the doctor and begged him to do something to save her children. But from the young man's anxious expression

and nervous pacing between the two cots, she sensed that he, too, had little hope of their survival.

A huge fire burned in the grate. On a trivet a bronchitis kettle poured steam out into the room. The atmosphere smelt of balsam, camphor and carbolic despite the fact that both windows were open, the curtains blowing inwards as draughts carried the freezing night air towards the chimney.

The door opened and the small, plump, erect figure of Lady Clotilde Rochford, the children's grandmother, came marching into the sickroom. Her dark, beady eyes swept round to the windows and seeing them open, she ordered the nurse to close them at once.

The doctor's feeble protest was drowned by her imperious command that she wanted none of his newfangled ideas in her house; that he was far too young and inexperienced to argue with her and that the windows were to remain closed. As always when aroused, Lady Clotilde's voice betrayed her French origins and her accent became noticeable.

The young man bowed his head submissively. Lady Rochford senior's reputation was well known to him. He had been warned several times that she was autocratic, ruled her large household with a rod of iron and totally dominated her son's wife, Lady Alice Rochford.

John Forbes decided not to argue with this formidable woman. He was appalled by the misfortune that his very first visit to Rochford Manor should be for so serious an illness. But at twenty-six years of age, he had only last week come to Havorhurst to replace the old village doctor who had formerly been in attendance on the Rochford family. The old grandmother was perfectly correct when she called him, John Forbes, inexperienced, for with a sinking heart he knew that he had still not diagnosed the infants' illness.

Alice Rochford's endless sobbing filled the room. Her mother-in-law, barely glancing at her, walked over to the cot and looked down at the baby. Perfectly in control of her emotions, she said sharply:

“I can see the child is dying.” She turned to the nurse. “Irene, tell Burns to send one of the menservants to fetch the parson. The baby should be baptised at once!”

The child in the adjacent cot now went into a convulsive fit as she, too, struggled desperately for breath. Blood and mucus dribbled from her mouth. The young doctor wiped it away nervously with a piece of cotton wool. This child, Josephine, had been ill for nearly two days and despite the nurse’s repeated attempts to feed her, was now suffering from starvation and dehydration, for she seemed unable to swallow even sips of port wine.

“You’re certain they do not have diphtheria?” asked the grandmother in doubtful tones, her eyes boring into the nervous young doctor’s face.

“There is no sign of the membrane in the throat,” he reiterated the opinion he had given her that morning. “And neither child has been in contact with anyone who has the disease.” He turned and stared at the pale, weeping woman by the bed. “Lady Alice assures me that no-one but herself, the children’s father, you and their nurse have been near the nursery since the new baby was born. The children cannot have contracted diphtheria without catching it from someone with the disease.”

Lady Rochford nodded. One of her own two sons had died of the complaint during an epidemic in France and she had seen for herself the cruel white membrane growing over the windpipe until the unhappy child had suffocated. Mercifully her second son, Oliver, Alice’s husband, had not then been born, for the disease had spread like wildfire through the local community and her own child’s death was but one of many.

“You must try to resign yourself to God’s will, Alice!” she said in firm tones to her daughter-in-law. “Be thankful that you are young enough to bear other children.”

There was a knock at the door and as Lord Oliver came into the room, his wife flung herself hysterically into his arms.

“My babies are dying,” she cried.

A soldier by profession, Oliver Rochford was ill at ease in the sickroom; moreover, he did not care for his wife's uncontrolled emotionalism although he was a kindly man and sympathised with her distress. Barely recovered from childbirth, she was not up to this ordeal, he told himself as he patted her head soothingly. He himself was not particularly stricken by the thought that he was about to lose his two first-born children. Both were girls and he, like his mother, had passionately hoped both babies would be boys. By the look of things, the new baby had already passed away, he thought as he watched helplessly whilst the doctor covered the child's face with the sheet.

Alice Rochford clung to her husband, staring up into his pale blue eyes in despair.

"She has not yet been baptised," she cried in an anguished voice. "Do you understand, Oliver? She cannot now be buried in consecrated ground!"

Baron, Lord Oliver Rochford pushed a lock of gingery hair from his forehead and cleared his throat noisily.

"Nonsense, m'dear," he said firmly. "Parson will bury the infants where I want – where all the Rochfords are buried – in St Stephen's graveyard, and that's all there is to it."

"But . . ." Alice began when old Lady Rochford interrupted.

"Oliver is quite right. The Reverend Appleby will not want to lose his living. He will do as Oliver says," she said pointedly.

She looked at her son – a rotund short sturdy man with ginger side-whiskers and moustache. He had the upright bearing of a military man and she was immensely proud of him.

"Better take Alice to her room, Oliver," she suggested. "I'll stay here until . . ."

Until the older child dies, thought John Forbes unhappily. Deep down inside, he was a little shocked by this aristocratic woman's seeming indifference to death. She was, after all, the infants' grandmother and as far as he knew, there were no other children. The return of the nurse, Irene, together with the Reverend Appleby interrupted his thoughts. He stood in the

shadows at the back of the room whilst the parson, in his white surplice, prayed for the dying child.

“We beseech Thee to have mercy on this child, Josephine Mildred, and whensoever her soul shall depart it may be without sin presented unto Thee.”

To the young doctor’s surprise, the parson turned and walked over to the cot where the dead baby lay and in barely audible tones, began the Baptismal service. Briefly he named her Barbara Alice and committed her soul to God.

Not a little shocked for the second time that night, the doctor realised that Baron Rochford, the children’s father, must have spoken to the parson regarding the baby’s future burial place.

Old Lady Rochford must have read his thoughts for she now approached him, saying in a low, forceful tone:

“We would not want a family doctor attending our household who was in any respect inclined to tittle-tattle,” she said, her dark brown eyes boring into his as she spoke. “Naturally, I do not imagine you, Doctor Forbes, would dream of discussing our affairs with anyone, for I am sure you know what village gossips are – especially regarding those of us who happen to be born in better circumstances than others. You take my meaning, Doctor?”

He understood her very well indeed and for a moment anger surged through him. What right had this autocratic old woman to lay down the law – alter the rules to suit her own convenience? Was it money or position that made such people so powerful?

Both, he thought bitterly. There had been many other applicants for the post left vacant by the late Havorhurst doctor and he, John Forbes, newly qualified, had badly wanted this employment. Lady Rochford could soon turn this country district against him, he reflected, for the family owned nearly every farm, public house, cottage, mill and smithy for miles around. His patients were the tenant farmers or employees of the Rochfords and doubtless were well aware of their dependence upon the family – a fact he was himself now forced to appreciate.

Weakly he nodded, telling himself that the matter of the baby's baptism was really no concern of his anyway; that he could count himself lucky that he had not been asked to disobey his Hippocratic Oath, something he would never do. And who could say but that it might be right not to deny an innocent baby a Christian burial merely because it had died before it had been named.

But the relief he felt at such self-reassurance was shortlived. Within two hours the little girl, too, was dead, and left alone in the sickroom with the nurse, he realised he had now to complete two death certificates.

"Cause of death . . ." What should he write? he asked himself uneasily. The fact was he did not know what had killed them. *Could it have been diphtheria after all?*

He searched his mind for facts he had learned about the disease and tried to recall the few cases he had seen in hospital. The various possibilities that had tortured his mind these past two days now crowded in on him again. Tumour on the brain, epilepsy, croup, hemiplegia . . . all of these would give rise to convulsions, and could bring about sudden death. But the fact that both babies had been taken ill at the same time . . .

Suddenly, with chilling clarity, he recalled a lecture he had attended as a medical student. It had been given by an eminent German professor and the young doctor could remember little of its subject matter. But what he did now recall was the Professor's caution at the end of the lecture.

"Never discard the diagnosis of an illness on the grounds that not *all* the usual or more obvious symptoms are present. You will come across occasions when even the most predominant symptoms are absent. The patient may still have the disease you suspect but in that particular individual, the symptoms may be invisible to the naked eye. The day will come – and I am convinced of it – when we shall discover the means to see inside a body. Then and then only can we be certain of our diagnosis."

Shocked, wearied beyond words by the long hours of vigil in the sickroom, the young doctor covered his face with his hands.

To admit his doubts *now* to old Lady Rochford was a terrifying prospect for he had been so adamant in resisting her suggestion that the babies had diphtheria. Not that he could have saved either child's life for they would most certainly have died, so swift was the onslaught of illness. But the woman had seemed content to accept his diagnosis of a brain storm due either to a tumour on the brain or some other weakness in their constitutions. When he had questioned her about possible hereditary factors, she had told him quite readily that she was far from happy about her daughter-in-law's mental condition. Poor Lady Alice had had difficult pregnancies and births with both children, was frequently ill and cried a great deal, she said. The old family doctor had had to attend Lady Alice regularly and had stated bluntly that such cases of melancholia during the child-bearing period could unfortunately be hereditary, though were not always so.

"I am not in the least surprised to hear that she may well have passed on this weakness of the brain to those children," Lady Rochford said bluntly. Her voice had softened suddenly. "My poor son! He may never now achieve his dearest wish to have a healthy son and heir for Rochford."

John Forbes sighed as he wrote on each certificate the word "Convulsions" as the cause of death. He could foresee that he might himself be a frequent visitor to the Manor to attend the bereaved mother who no doubt would relapse into yet another bout of melancholia. But for the meanwhile at least, his work here was done and he could go home.

"See that the room is fumigated very thoroughly with sulphur after the bodies have been removed," he told the weeping nurse. He felt a moment's compassion for the red-eyed girl. She would almost certainly be dismissed from her employment although she had worked tirelessly and without sleep, caring for the sick children whom she had obviously loved in her simple way. "Try not to distress yourself too much," he murmured. "There was nothing you or anyone could do to save them."

He picked up his black bag and with a last quick glance at the

two white-shrouded cots, left the room and made his way downstairs. Everywhere the maids were hurriedly drawing the curtains in all the rooms. The silence and stillness of death had already penetrated the big house. An elderly butler handed him his coat and hat and opened the front door for him.

The night sky outside was brilliant with stars, the air sharp with frost which had already laid its white covering over the lawns and trees. He shivered as he waited for the groom to bring round his gig. There was something oppressive about the big darkened old manor house which seemed inexplicably to threaten him. Not a single light showed through the curtains windows. He could hear the sound of wheels crunching on the hard gravel of the drive and the noise from nearby of his horse snorting with impatience to be off to its own warm stable. The doctor shivered again, his mind tormented by the suspicion that he had made a terrible mistake.

He shook himself as if to shrug off his misgivings. What did it really matter – except to his own peace of mind? His wrong diagnosis could harm nobody, least of all the two dead infants. Doubtless before long there would be other children, hopefully healthy ones, and these two little girls would be forgotten. Diphtheria or convulsions? What did it matter how they had died?

He could not know that it mattered so greatly to the children's grandmother that never again would she show affection for her daughter-in-law, nor accord her more than the barest civility; that she was now convinced that poor Alice had brought into the Rochford family the ugly strain of insanity.

"There must be no more sickly Rochford girls," she said to her sister-in-law. "We can but hope that next time, Mildred, Alice manages to give poor Oliver a healthy son and heir."

It was a year before Rowell, the first of the five healthy, lusty Rochford boys was born, ten years before Francis, the youngest arrived. By then the untimely deaths of the infants were all but forgotten until, on Francis' sixth birthday, Alice Rochford produced her last child.

She died not knowing that it was a girl.

Chapter 1

August 1889

Concealed by the curtains drawn across the oriel window in the long gallery, Willow Tetford peered down into the hall below, her gaze concentrated upon the tall, elegantly-clad figure of the eldest of the Rochford brothers. Rowell was, as usual, encircled by a bevy of admiring females.

“He is far the most handsome of all the men here tonight,” Willow remarked. “Do you not agree that he looks very beautiful, Pelham?”

Pelham Rochford turned to the fifteen year-old girl with a mixture of amusement and jealousy.

“You don’t call men ‘beautiful’,” he corrected her not unkindly. He too stared down at his eldest brother but without the young girl’s adoration. He did not deny Rowell’s good looks which he, being six years younger, often envied. But in Pelham’s opinion that brooding romantic appearance concealed a nature very far from enviable. Ever since their father had died and Rowell had inherited the title of Baron and become head of the family, it seemed to Pelham that his eldest brother had grown far too superior and self-opinionated and to have lost what little sense of humour he had had in his youth. Although

still only twenty-four years of age, Rowell had adopted the airs and manners of a far older man and was on occasions objectionably autocratic with his four younger brothers. Pelham greatly preferred Toby whose twenty-first birthday was being celebrated this evening with a gala ball at Rochford Manor.

“Who is that red-haired lady Rowell is taking in to dance?” Willow asked urgently beside him. “I don’t think I have ever seen her before. She is very beautiful, isn’t she?”

Despite the warmth of the summer evening the girl shivered, drawing her night-robe more closely around her slim young body and pressing nearer to her companion. She was supposed to be safely tucked up in her bed, but her curiosity had got the better of her and dear, fun-loving Pelham had offered to keep watch whilst she crept from her bedroom to her present place of concealment. It was nearly midnight and the hall, drawing-room and dining-room thronged with several hundred guests, all attired in their finest clothes and jewels.

“That is Mrs Georgina Grey,” Pelham answered Willow’s question; and without thinking he added, “Rowell’s mistress!”

Only as he looked down into Willow’s wide uncomprehending gaze did he remember that he was talking to a girl still young enough to be termed a child. Brought up by a strict Quaker mother, Willow’s innocence was total and he deeply regretted his slip of the tongue. Now to further his embarrassment, she asked him to explain his meaning.

“I’ll tell you one day – when you are older,” he prevaricated, his voice sharper than he intended in his confusion. “You are much too young yet to understand about such things,” he added more gently.

Willow’s lips pursed into a pout and she scowled at him as she said sighing:

“That is what Mama always tells me whenever I ask her anything important, especially if it is about love and marriage and having babies.” She swept the silky curtain of fair hair away from her delicately boned face and sighed again. “Anyway I do

know about love. I love you and Toby and Papa and I'm not sure but I think I love Rowell best of all."

"Then don't!" Pelham said, this time the sharpness of his tone intentional. "My dear brother Rowell isn't the least interested in a child of your age!"

Unperturbed, for she was well aware of her unimportance, Willow merely nodded her agreement. Rowell rarely spoke to her and it was one of the "Very Special Days" she noted in her diary if he so much as smiled at her once in the course of a week.

"Nobody seems to notice that I am growing up very fast," Willow remarked, able as always to talk to Pelham on equal terms. He was exactly as she, an only child, had always imagined a brother might be – teasing, affectionate, sometimes a little patronising but never more than his three years' seniority warranted, and never unkind.

Pelham remained silent. He was disturbed by Willow's innocent remark which was unconsciously provocative. He was only too well aware of late, that the young American girl had made the transition from child to woman during the summer she had been at Rochford Manor. She had lost the roundness of childhood and was now tall and slender, and her natural beauty the more remarkable for her somewhat unusual colouring. From her Scandinavian mother she had inherited her beautiful hair which was almost white blonde, and her large expressive brown eyes.

Through the thin lawn of her nightgown her small pointed breasts were clearly noticeable and now, when she pouted, he found himself longing to kiss those pursed red lips and to touch the delicate curved body with his hands. But her immaturity was a barrier he had not yet felt able to breach. He was both afraid of spoiling that radiant, child-like trust in him and yet drawn to her as to a magnet. Instead of hiding here with her in the long gallery, he could have been downstairs drinking champagne, dancing with a dozen or more eager partners, but he preferred to be alone with Willow – a mere child. It was a state of mind he could not understand.

It was almost with relief that he saw the tall, angular figure of his brother Toby approaching them. Toby was carrying a tray of food.

“We’re over here, Toby!” Willow called in a low voice as the young man peered short-sightedly over his spectacles down the long gallery.

“Didn’t realise Pelham was with you!” Toby said in his short, clipped speech – a mannerism caused by acute shyness. “Thought you might be hungry, Willow. You usually are!”

Willow took the tray from him, her dark brown eyes sparkling.

“You’re dear and kind and thoughtful,” she said as she viewed the delicacies eagerly. Although very occasionally she had been permitted to eat with the grown-ups, normally she had her meals in the old nursery with the younger Rochford boys, seventeen year-old Rupert and fifteen year-old Francis, where food was served that Cook considered more wholesome for growing bodies. Willow did not mind being classified as “nursery” although she always ate with her parents when she was at home. The relegation was more than offset by the delight of being a guest of the Rochford family for the whole summer whilst her parents were touring Europe.

They had come from San Francisco to England and rented Langham House for a year. It adjoined the Rochfords’ estate and her parents, Willoughby and Beatrice Tetford, had warned her that they might not be received by their aristocratic neighbours. Despite the immense wealth her father had accumulated through his investment in the railroads, Willow was led to understand that the English upper class was very particular about breeding and she must not be disappointed if they were snubbed. But this had proved far from the case. Old Lady Rochford, who was the senior member of the family, had made discreet enquiries and pronounced that the fifteen year-old girl would provide a much needed feminine influence in the lives of her five grandsons.

“Reckon the old lady considers our little Willow too young to be of interest to the boys *that way*,” Willoughby Tetford had commented shrewdly to his wife. “A good thing we are paying for a real lady governess for the child. She won’t be at a loss when it comes to manners and deportment.”

The shrewdness that had made him a dollar millionaire was proven once more when old Lady Rochford pronounced herself delighted by the young girl’s behaviour and disposition, and it was she who proposed that Willow should remain at Rochford Manor whilst the Tetfords made their European tour.

The arrangement had suited everyone perfectly, not least of all Willow who was delighting in the sudden acquisition of five “brothers”. Although Rowell, being so much older and the head of the family, had little to say to her, she adored him from afar and was soon caught in the grips of a mute hero-worship for the elegant, graceful young Baron.

At first she had felt ill at ease in the company of the second brother, Toby. His shyness communicated itself in such a way that she imagined herself rebuffed, until one day he invited her into the room he called his “laboratory” and haltingly confessed that he would really have liked to be a doctor. For the first time she saw him smile when innocently she asked why he could not study the medical sciences if he so wished. Patiently he explained that his grandmother would not permit him to consider such a middle class profession.

“Gentlemen in England do not have careers,” he told Willow wistfully.

The youngest of the five Rochford boys, Francis, referred to Toby as “The Professor”. Willow had to admit that Toby did often take on the appearance of an absent-minded scientist when, spectacles slipping to the end of his nose and his mane of dark chestnut-coloured hair in disarray, he strode through the gardens in a torment of silent thoughts about “his work.” More often than not he ignored the young girl simply because he did not see her.

Willow had had no difficulty, however, in forming an instant rapport with the friendly, laughing, mischievous, good-natured Pelham. But with Rupert, as with Toby, it had taken a little time before she felt at ease with him. Shorter in stature than his brothers, delicately built, with large, dark-lashed violet blue eyes, he would have made a remarkably pretty girl; but the absence of masculinity in his appearance and nature had made him the butt of his school fellows as well as his brothers, and by the time Willow was introduced to him he had developed a surly, reserved manner that was at variance with his sensitive, artistic nature. He had taught himself to play the violin and when he discovered that Willow was only too happy to accompany him upon the piano, she found herself welcomed to the music room, his special domain and unused by any other members of the family.

Although Willow was obliged to study English history and botany with her governess in the mornings, she was excused afternoon lessons, and the whole summer had seemed to her to be bathed in a golden glow of sunshine and happiness. The beautiful old manor house had been filled with guests, many of them eligible young ladies who lived in nearby country houses and the young "bloods" who had been Rowell's friends at Oxford. There had been tea parties on the lawn, croquet, boating on the lake, rides in the landaus into the lovely Kentish countryside for luncheon picnics; dancing, charades and other such harmless entertainments in the evenings. Rupert avoided such occasions, preferring to spend the time with the hero of his schooldays, young Alfred Douglas. Francis and Willow were shadowy figures on the fringe of their elders' daytime entertainment, permitted to linger there provided they remained unobtrusive and undemanding of attention.

If there were any blight upon this idyllic summer for Willow it was the thought of the poor young girl who had perforce to spend her life in one of the two chambers at the top of the spiral staircase that comprised the west tower of the Manor. Willow had been living at Rochford for several weeks before she even

heard mentioned the existence of the only Rochford girl. A servant inadvertently spoke of “poor Miss Dorothy” and when Willow questioned the maid, she was told that the little girl was mentally and physically sub-normal and that no-one but Lady Rochford, the doctor and the nine-year-old child’s nurse were allowed to see her. The household staff were forbidden to talk about her.

“So don’t you ever let on I told you, Miss Willow,” the maid said fearfully, “else I’ll be dismissed as sure as you’re standing there.”

Her governess professed to know nothing and Willow, with her insatiable curiosity, longed to ask Pelham or Toby more about their little sister; but she dared not do so for she was greatly in awe of old Lady Rochford. Although Grandmère, as she was called by her grandsons, treated Willow kindly enough, she was dictatorial, critical and demanding, ruling even Rowell with a rod of iron. Her sister-in-law and companion, Aunt Mildred, lived in terror of arousing the old lady’s displeasure and Grandmère, who was nearly seventy, openly gave orders to the poor soul as if she were a servant. Aunt Milly, as the Rochford boys called her, never answered back and, uncomplaining, allowed herself to be bullied,

It disturbed Willow that the brothers seemed to take this domination of the elderly spinster quite for granted, as indeed did Aunt Mildred herself, Willow decided. Although they never defended her, at least Toby and Pelham always treated their aunt kindly; Rupert and Rowell ignored her and only Francis made fun of her.

Willow had not been long at the Manor before she recognised that Francis was his grandmother’s favourite. Indifferent to this favouritism, Pelham informed Willow that it was due to his brother’s uncanny resemblance to their late father, Grandmère’s only surviving much loved son. Willow had seen the portrait of Lord Oliver Rochford in the library and had to admit that there was a singular likeness. Francis’ ginger fair hair and blue eyes were a replica of his father’s. Rupert, alone of the five boys, resembled

his dead mother, Alice Rochford, a fair haired, shadowy creature. Willow was certain Grandmère had never much liked her daughter-in-law for she never spoke of her without a note of irritation in her voice.

Pelham, Toby and Rowell had inherited their grandmother's French blood and with it her dark Latin colouring. Rowell was by far the most handsome of the three, but Toby was the nicest, Willow thought. It was typical of him to think of her up here in the gallery supposedly alone and with nothing to eat.

"You ought not to be here," Toby said as he watched Willow sampling the food he had brought her. "If someone tells Grandmère or your governess, you'll be in serious trouble."

Willow smiled mischievously.

"I know, Toby, but it *is* your birthday, your coming-of-age birthday! I can see everything but the dancers from up here. I can't just go to bed and imagine it all. I saw Rowell go by. He is with a Mrs Georgina Grey who Pelham says is his mistress but Pelham will not tell me what a mistress is. You will explain to me, won't you, Toby?"

"I'll do no such thing!" Toby replied with a sharp, angry look at Pelham. "You really should go to bed, Willow. One of the servants will see you and tell Grandmère; or your governess may already be looking to make sure you are safely in your room. And Pelham, you should be downstairs. I saw several girls without dancing partners."

"You're the guest of honour, Toby, you go and dance with them!" Pelham said quickly. "I'm going to dance with Willow."

He jumped up and pulled Willow to her feet as the strains of a polka wafted up from the ballroom. Toby stood suddenly silent, watching as with a little murmur of excitement, Willow took Pelham's outstretched hands. As they gavotted down the length of the gallery, Toby turned on his heel and went downstairs.

"Enjoying it?" Pelham asked Willow as he looked down at her flushed, excited face. Her white nightgown was billowing around her and her eyes were sparkling with laughter as he whirled her around and around. He, too, felt excitement mounting in him

and he drew the girl closer. Her breath was warm on his cheek, her body even warmer and he said softly: "Close your eyes, Willow. Imagine you are wearing the most beautiful white satin ballgown. There are flowers in your hair and diamonds around your neck and wrists. You are the loveliest girl in the room and everyone else has stopped dancing to watch us. You are Cinderella and I am your Prince Charming. We are falling in love . . ."

Pelham's voice, the music, the excitement of the evening, were overwhelming. Willow felt her body melting as she gave herself up to the dream Pelham was creating. This was the most magical moment of her life. Perhaps she really was falling in love, she thought, except that it should be Rowell's arms enfolding her, Rowell's voice whispering to her . . .

With her eyes closed it was not so difficult to imagine that it really was Rowell's hand encircling her waist, the warmth of his palm penetrating the thin satin of her ballgown, Rowell's voice murmuring against her hair: "You are so sweet, my little Willow. You cannot believe how lovely you are, so soft, like a swansdown feather in my arms."

It seemed the most natural thing in the world when, as the music ended, she felt the strong, firm lips of her dream lover pressing against her mouth. She began to tremble as strange sweet sensations spread through her body. Her eyes still closed, she returned the kiss. Only when Pelham broke away from their embrace and spoke her name did her eyes open and with a gasp of dismay, she realised that it was not Rowell who had been kissing her but his brother.

"Pelham," she gasped. The hot colour flooded her cheeks as she stared at him in an agony of embarrassment. Unaware of her inner turmoil, Pelham smiled.

"No-one has ever kissed you before, have they?" he demanded. Mistaking her blushes for those of a young girl newly awakened to the emotions of passion, his excitement mounted. But as he tried to draw Willow back into his arms, with surprising force she raised her hands and pushed him away from her.

“No, Pelham, I don’t want to be kissed again. You don’t understand. I did not realise what was happening. I . . .” She broke off in confusion. Still convinced that her rejection of him was but the manifestation of maidenly reserve, Pelham caught her outstretched hands and pulled her back into his embrace. Feeling her body stiffen as she resisted him, he did not try to kiss her mouth but ran his hand gently down her back.

“You have nothing to fear, my little darling,” he murmured reassuringly. “We are doing nothing wrong. Admit that you like to feel me touching you. You liked my kiss too, didn’t you?”

Willow drew a deep, shuddering breath as she strove to unravel the *mélée* of her feelings. She did not question how Pelham knew that she was indeed enjoying the sensation aroused deep within her by the gentle motion of his hand on her back; that his kiss had been a totally new, disturbing but far from unpleasant experience. It seemed illogical that he could guess at her body’s response to him and yet be blindly unaware that in her mind it was Rowell she wanted to touch and kiss her.

As she drew away from him, she said urgently: “I think Toby was right and I ought to go back to my room before anyone sees us. Goodnight, Pelham. Thank you . . . Thank you for letting me enjoy a little of Toby’s party. Let me go now, *please!*”

There was something in the girl’s tone which warned Pelham not to try to detain her, although by now he was himself deeply aroused. He watched her disappearing down the long gallery, the white nightgown floating around her small ghostly figure. What had started almost as a prank to please a child had ended with the discovery that the child was very much a woman; indeed, far more desirable than most of the pretty young girls who awaited his attentions downstairs. In their teens and early twenties, most had already been presented at Court. They were well launched on the social round of activities provided by their Mamas to enable them to find suitable – and eligible – husbands. Flirtatious, pretty coquettes, they giggled and danced and

schemed in a merry-go-round of activities that might enhance this search.

Pelham, even at the moderately tender age of eighteen, had amused himself throughout the summer holidays in the company of these young females and been quite content to do so, enjoying the harmless flirtations. For more down to earth pursuits, there were the young actresses always available at the stage door who were only too happy to be wined, dined and then seduced by any young blood with money enough to shower them with gifts in return for their favours.

Rowell, of course, had a mistress, the exotic Georgina Grey, older than he by six months and already a widow. Disappointingly for her but fortunately for Rowell, her late husband had been in poor straits financially and left his young widow practically penniless. But for Rowell she would have had to return to the stage where she had been a very indifferent actress with little hope of stardom. Nor could there ever have been any hope for Georgina of captivating a future king as had the beautiful Lillie Langtry. But she was certainly beautiful enough to attract Rowell's attention and seemed very satisfied with her handsome young baron. Unfortunately for Rowell, Pelham reflected, other men were interested too, and Rowell was finding his lovely Georgina an expensive pleasure.

But Pelham was not thinking of Rowell or his mistress as he descended the wide staircase and joined the throng of merry-makers who were calling greetings to him. His mind was filled with the memory of Willow's soft lips, of her tiny, slender waist, of the warmth of her body beneath his hands.

Willow was relieved when on the following morning at breakfast, Rowell announced that he was leaving for Cowes where Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales were entertaining the German Kaiser on an official visit.

"I will be away for several days," Rowell said, adding that he would be on his yacht at Cowes. Unable to forget the stupid

mistake her imagination had played with her the previous night, Willow felt unbearably shy in his presence and was pleased when he left.

Lady Rochford seemed equally happy about Rowell's departure, for she approved very much of the fact that Rowell was frequently admitted by the forty-eight-year-old Prince of Wales into his circle of friends. The Prince liked to have attractive people around him, especially if, like Rowell, they shared his own enjoyment of shooting, yachting, croquet, cards and horse racing. Rowell kept an excellent stable at Rochford and had even lent the Prince one of his stallions at stud that had won several big races.

Grandmère was unaware that the Prince would be seeing Georgina as well as Rowell, at Cowes; that he approved of Rowell's lovely red-headed mistress who reminded him not a little of his ex-mistress, Lillie.

But no sooner had Rowell finally departed in his phaeton with a second carriage following with his valet and luggage, than Willow's relief turned to dismay. She felt as if all the sunshine had gone from her life; that these next five days would have no point, no meaning. Not even Pelham's suggestion that they should take a bicycle ride into the countryside, a pastime she usually much enjoyed, could cheer her flagging spirits. Pelham watched her anxiously, afraid lest he had forced himself upon her too hurriedly; that she was not, after all, ready to grow up and consequently feared him lest he renew his advances.

Pleading a headache, Willow evaded his company and since her governess was nowhere to be seen, she went in search of Toby. He, as always, was in the turret room he called his "laboratory". Despite the late hours he had kept the previous night, he was deeply engrossed in his work and did not at first hear Willow's entry.

When at last he looked up from his Bunsen burner, he was surprised to see her sitting in the window seat, staring forlornly into the sun-drenched garden.

“I beg your pardon, Willow. Never heard you come in,” he said, pushing his spectacles further up his nose and peering at her vaguely. “Something you wanted?”

Willow shook her head. The kindness that always pervaded Toby’s voice when he did remember to speak to her was now her undoing. The tears which had threatened all morning spilled down her cheeks. Short-sighted though he was, Toby saw them, and walking over to her, handed her his handkerchief. The creases which were already etched into his forehead by too much frowning now deepened into an anxious scowl.

“Pelham hasn’t been upsetting you, has he?” he asked suspiciously. When he had found Pelham last night in the long gallery with Willow, there was something in his brother’s flushed cheeks and bright eyes that had warned him Pelham was up to mischief. Throughout their long, shared childhood, Pelham had always had that look when he was about to misbehave himself. Toby had come upon him once with a giggling housemaid with just that same expression on his face and he had not needed Pelham to explain what he was about!

“If Pelham has done anything to upset you . . .” he began, but Willow interrupted him.

“No, Toby! He . . . I . . . it wasn’t his fault. I was dancing with him and I thought . . . it was my fault . . .” She broke off as the tears choked in her throat.

Toby’s long thin fingers curled into his palms as his hands clenched. This was one of the very, very rare occasions in his life when he was furiously angry. Willow was a guest, very young and totally trusting. If his brother had taken advantage of her even in the smallest way, Toby intended to see that he suffered for it.

“Perhaps you’d better tell me all about it,” he said, keeping his voice as gentle as he could in the circumstances.

He waited patiently whilst Willow sniffed, blew into his handkerchief and found her voice. Haltingly she told him that she was afraid she had fallen in love with Rowell; that she knew such

a love was ridiculous and quite hopeless, that she was far, far too young for him. She ended with a watery smile:

“But even telling myself so, and believing it, doesn’t stop me thinking about him. Don’t you see, Toby, what it means?” she said wistfully. “I’m doomed forever to love a man who could never love me. So now I’ll never be able to get married and have babies like other girls!”

Despite his concern for her unhappiness, Toby only just succeeded in hiding his amusement.

“I don’t think the situation is quite as serious as all that,” he said, stroking her hair clumsily as if she were a dog or a horse that needed his soothing touch. “From what I’ve heard, most girls of your age fall in love a dozen and one times before they meet their future husbands. After all, Willow, you *are* only fifteen, aren’t you? Or is it fourteen?”

Willow managed another watery smile.

“It was my birthday last month!” she reminded him. “You gave me Rudyard Kipling’s new book, *Plain Tales from the Hills*. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes, of course!” Toby replied although he had indeed forgotten. “Well then, fifteen, *just*. I think I’d forget all about falling in love for the time being if I were you.”

“And forget about kissing too?” Willow asked.

Once again, Toby’s face darkened.

“What has kissing to do with it? I thought you said that it was when you were dancing with Pelham that . . . that you started thinking romantic thoughts about Rowell.”

“Oh, yes it was!” Willow agreed. “But it was even worse when Pelham kissed me. If it had been Rowell, I don’t think I’d ever have wanted that kiss to end!”

Abruptly Toby turned his back on her and returned to the work table where he pretended to busy himself tidying some of the paraphernalia littering the surface. It was only rarely that he concerned himself with the activities of his four brothers. At a very early age, he had felt apart from them, different in some indefinable way;