

The Dynasty

The Rochford Trilogy

Claire

LORRIMER



Prologue

November 1929

“I have asked you all to be here today because, I’m afraid to say, the situation is a great deal worse than any of us expected! Knowing the dreadful effect on the Americans following the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange, you must all have realized that the Tetford Railroad and Transportation Corporation and its various ancillary companies could not go unscathed. What we had not anticipated was that it could be wiped out.”

Toby Rochford adjusted the spectacles which had slipped to the end of his nose, and clearing his throat, he continued.

“I know that all of you invested heavily in TRTC and rely to one degree or another on the exceptionally good income it has always provided. I saw our accountant yesterday and he has asked me, as senior member of the family, to advise you that to all intents and purposes, TRTC no longer exists. That is to say, we, as a family, are virtually bankrupt and must now consider the future.”

For the first time, Zandra paid attention to what her uncle was saying. Family conferences about money were of little interest to her and in the past, she had been excused attention because of her youth. Today, only four months short of her coming of age, Uncle Toby had insisted she be present.

What exactly did it mean to be “bankrupt”, she wondered? Judging by the expressions on the faces of all her relations, it was something in the nature of a disaster. She recalled now the shocked voices of her uncle and aunt when they’d read in the newspapers of American businessmen jumping out of skyscraper windows because they were financially ruined. It had struck her as a stupid thing to do, and she had forgotten it until now. A dozen questions rose to her mind but, for once, she curbed her impulsiveness and was silenced by the look of distress on her aunt’s face.

Aunt Willow and Uncle Toby had adopted her and her young brother Jamie, after the death of their parents and she had grown up here at Rochford with Aunt Willow’s son, Oliver, and his sister, Alice. Her other cousin, Lucy, had married Alexis when she was only eighteen so she, Zandra, had not seen so much of her in her childhood. Aunt Willow had always treated her as a daughter, and although there had been many times when she, Zandra, had resented her aunt’s conventional upbringing, she sensed that she loved her even more than she loved her own daughters, Lucy and Alice.

Zandra turned to look at her younger cousin. Poor Alice! she thought. She so much wanted to be married, but although she’d been quite pretty as a child, she was now both plump and plain, and at the age of twenty-six, seemed resigned to the fact that she would be a spinster. Oliver had once said to Zandra that Alice would certainly find a husband sooner or later because she, together with Lucy and himself, had inherited TRTC on the death of their American grandfather. If it now no longer existed, so, too, were Alice’s hopes of finding a husband! Alice was not very intelligent, Zandra thought, and as she was continuing in her usual placid manner with her embroidery, she assumed her cousin had not yet grasped the effects of Uncle Toby’s announcement.

Despite Aunt Willow’s determination to find her, Zandra, a husband, she had no intention of settling down to a life of

domesticity for a long while yet. Oliver had promised to give her a job at Sky-Ways, the airline he and his friend, Henry Barratt, had started after the war. She was already an accomplished pilot and flying the Gipsy Moth was a lot more fun than being at the domestic science school Aunt Willow had chosen for her when she'd returned in disgrace from Paris! She had been staying with her Uncle Pelham and her French aunt, Tante Silvie, whose hairdresser, Léon, had fallen madly in love with her! When her secret meetings with Léon were discovered, Tante Silvie, understanding and sympathetic though she was, had packed her off home. Aunt Willow wanted her to have a Season like Alice, but she had balked at the idea; and in order to silence her guardian, she had persuaded Hugh Conway, the dull but worthy son of a neighbour, to pretend they were engaged. Since then, she had had a lot more freedom, and with Hugh to escort her – and keep her in order, presumably – she could come and go much as she pleased.

“. . . sell my controlling shareholding in Sky-Ways. Jane and I are determined to keep to the plan to send Giles to Eton at all costs.”

Zandra's eyes swung back to Oliver's tall, handsome figure. He was standing by the drawing-room windows, his arm around Jane's shoulders. The seven-year-old Giles was their only child, and Zandra understood her cousin's desire to send his son to his old school; but to think of selling his precious airline . . .

“Oh no, Ollie!” she cried aghast. “You can't sell Sky-Ways!”

Oliver crossed the room and ruffled her hair.

“Don't make a drama of it, Zee-Zee! I'll keep the Gipsy Moth so you can still have your joyrides! You may have to get a job and subscribe to its upkeep, though.”

“I will, of course I will. I'll . . .”

“Zandra, this isn't the time to discuss your amusements,” Willow broke in sharply. “Anyway, now that we are all going to have to make serious economies as your Uncle Toby has just explained, you will need to start saving for your trousseau before

you indulge your whims. When your uncle and I gave our consent to your engagement to Hugh, we had supposed we would be giving you a sizeable allowance since Hugh is not exactly well off. That is no longer possible.”

Zandra’s mouth tightened and she jumped to her feet.

“As far as my flying is concerned, you’ve never approved of it just because I’m a girl. Well, Lady Heath and Lady Bailey fly so it’s no good telling me flying is ‘an unsuitable sport for young ladies’ – and I don’t care how hard I have to work, I’m going to go on with it. As for saving up for my trousseau – that won’t be necessary!”

Zandra’s voice was husky but rang out perfectly clearly as she announced: “I’m not going to marry Hugh. If you want to know the truth, I never intended to do so; so you and Uncle Toby can stop worrying about my bottom drawer! I’m sorry if I’ve upset you, Aunt Willow, and I’m sorry about everyone losing their money and TRTC collapsing and everything; but I might as well be honest and admit I’m glad for me. Now perhaps you’ll stop trying to marry me off and let me live my life the way I want.”

Her head high, her large blue-grey eyes flashing, she stormed out of the drawing-room before any of the astonished members of her family could protest.

Part 1
1929–1933



Chapter 1

November 1929

Zandra pulled the collar of her tweed coat more tightly around her neck and stamped her feet beneath the confines of the travelling rug. The atmosphere inside Hugh's parents' Lanchester was only a degree warmer than outside on this cold, damp November afternoon, and no place to linger. However, the car was the only venue she could think of where they could talk in complete privacy; and after making her announcement to the family, she was not prepared to face them again until the breaking of her engagement was a *fait accompli*.

"I really am dreadfully sorry, Hugh!" she said for the second time. "But honestly, you did know from the start that I never intended to marry you."

The hangdog expression on the face of the young man beside her momentarily exasperated her. Why couldn't he put up some sort of fight – at least accuse her of using him? Instead, he said miserably: "It was my own fault for not telling you right at the start that I was in love with you – I mean, you couldn't know, could you?" He cleared his throat and blinked nervously. "When you suggested we should get engaged to keep Mrs Rochford from going on about you having to do the Season, I knew you

didn't care about me – that way, I mean; but I suppose I started hoping that maybe you'd begin to feel differently – I mean, you said we'd stay engaged until you were twenty-one, and I hoped that I could somehow make you care a bit about me before then – not just as a friend, you see.”

He broke off and began to fiddle nervously with the ends of his muffler. He looked so abject, Zandra's feelings of guilt intensified.

“I do care about you, Hugh, honestly I do. We'll always be friends, but I'm dreadfully sorry, I just don't love you the way you mean . . . that's to say, the way you think you love me. Don't you think you might be imagining it? We said we'd *pretend* we were in love to your parents and my family and you may have just got a bit confused acting the part of a doting fiancé. You were jolly good at it, too.”

Hugh managed a wry smile.

“Well, it wasn't pretending for me. You were so good at it, I suppose even I began to believe you really did want to marry me when we were both a bit older! You'd have made a jolly good actress, Zandra!”

Zandra drew a deep sigh.

“Yes, I know, but Aunt Willow wouldn't even consider it and Uncle Toby goes along with everything she says. It's so old-fashioned! Nowadays girls can do all kinds of things they couldn't have done before the war; but Aunt Willow thinks everything has changed for the worse! At least Tante Silvie is a bit more modern. I can talk to her and she understands.”

It had been Tante Silvie, she reflected, who had understood that she hadn't done anything wrong with Léon; that she had only agreed to the secret rendezvous with the Frenchman because it was fun, exciting to be treated like a grown-up instead of a schoolgirl. Her flirtation with him had been completely harmless – or anyway; at the start. When she had agreed to meet Léon that first time at a discreet outdoor café for an aperitif after her hair appointment, it was like a “dare” at school, for

she'd known perfectly well Tante Silvie would not approve. Léon, who was terribly good looking in a Latin kind of way, had paid her masses of compliments, and then told her he was mad about her before taking her hand and, in a wildly passionate manner, kissing the inside of her wrist.

In a way, the gesture had been almost funny; but even as she had suppressed a giggle, the feel of his lips, so hot against her soft skin, had aroused the strangest feelings somewhere deep inside her. She'd thought about it that night and wondered if it was the wine rather than Léon's kiss which had made her feel momentarily giddy. So she'd met him secretly a second time and a third, and discovered that despite her half-hearted protests, she sat longing for the moments when Léon would entwine his fingers with hers; murmur in that enchanting accent that he worshipped her; could not sleep at night for thinking about her; that she was "made by the angels to be loved by men!". His touches made her heart leap even though she was sure it was accidental when his arm brushed against her breast, or his knee pressed against hers beneath the table.

"But what on earth did you find to talk about to a man of his background?" Tante Silvie had moaned. "He is uneducated, a *gamin*, in the name of heaven! A hairdresser!"

Haltingly, Zandra had tried to explain that she and Léon did not converse in the way her aunt implied. Léon did all the talking – about her charm, her beauty, her Venus-like figure, her irresistible charm! That not only had it been very agreeable to listen to but exciting, disturbing, too.

"I shall have to tell your Aunt Willow," Tante Silvie had said, "much as I do not wish to do so! She placed you in my care, Zee-Zee, and I cannot lie to her. However, I will do what I can to mitigate her displeasure. You are twenty years old, *quand même*, and it is time you left the schoolroom and enjoyed the society of men. At your age, I . . . but we will not speak of that. Instead, I think it is time you learned a little about yourself so that you are not quite such a susceptible little innocent."

Although her aunt would not go so far as to reveal what transpired between a man and a woman when they fell in love and married, she had explained to Zandra that it was quite natural for her to feel a physical thrill when a good-looking young man like Léon kissed her. Had Zandra lived in an earlier era, Tante Silvie had said, she would have been married long since and be the mother of babies. Her body had become that of a woman several years previously and was ready and waiting for a lover, deceiving her into believing that someone like Léon was the one she desired. Zandra would doubtless be aroused by many more attractive young men before she met the right one to become a life partner – one who would ensure that it was a marriage of the minds and hearts as well as an attraction of the bodies.

Zandra's thoughts returned to the dejected young man beside her. Never once had she felt in the very least affected when poor Hugh had kissed her. Never once had she sat beside him hoping he would hold her hand. On the contrary, his hands were invariably hot and sweaty and it was always a relief when one or both of them were wearing gloves. Poor Hugh! He was little more than a boy, really, and only five years older than her tiresome young brother, Jamie. No wonder Hugh seemed gauche and childish after Léon!

“Look, Hugh, it isn't as if I am breaking off our engagement because there is someone else. I mean, maybe one day I'll grow up some more and feel differently . . . that is, if you haven't met another girl you like better than me. As a matter of fact, I'll let you into a secret. You know Katherine, Lawrence Rose's twin who comes to play tennis sometimes? She thinks you're terribly good looking. She saw you once without your glasses. I bet you don't know it was Kate who sent you that valentine last February! She's being presented next year when she leaves school and she's awfully nice!”

“Other girls just don't match up to you, Zandra. You're – well, different. I mean, you're not afraid of anything and you stand up for yourself. Gosh, you can even fly an aeroplane!”

Zandra's look of astonishment was genuine.

"So could you, if you wanted. It's easier than driving a car. I'm sure Ollie would teach you if you wanted to learn."

She broke off, remembering that poor Oliver was going to have to sell his partnership in his airline. Things must be pretty bad for such drastic steps to be necessary. As for Uncle Toby's announcement that they might have to sell Rochford – it was unthinkable! She had spent most of her life beneath its roof and it was home. She wondered whether to tell Hugh about the collapse of the American conglomerate that Aunt Willow's father had founded, but she decided against it. Money, after all, was something one did not talk about – or, as far as she was concerned, had ever thought about. She had not the slightest idea how much money Aunt Willow spent on hers and Jamie's clothes, or the cost of their school fees and seaside holidays; and since she, Zandra, never went anywhere unaccompanied, she had never needed money of her own. If she wanted cosmetics or sweets or to have her hair cut, she had only to charge the expense to the Rochford accounts.

Uncle Toby had looked very grave, she reflected, when he had made his announcement. He had been unusually forthright for he was a quiet, serious kind of person; gentle, kind, but vague. He absolutely adored Aunt Willow and when he wasn't poring over his precious medical journals in his study, his only concern was making sure she was happy! One day, Zandra hoped, she would find someone to love her as devotedly. What she would like most of all was a man with Uncle Toby's capacity for love and Uncle Pelham's jolly, adventurous zest for life. Tante Silvie never knew from one moment to the next what he was up to! According to her, he was quite capable at lunch-time of informing her she must pack their suitcases and be ready to go that afternoon to Venice, or Florence or the South of France for no better reason than he had happened to see an advertising poster in a travel agent's window and thought it might be an interesting place to visit.

Life had never been dull during her brief five months' visit to her much-loved French relations, and she was glad that the collapse of TRTC would not affect them too seriously. They were going to sell their beautiful château in Epernay and buy a smaller country house in the South of France; but Uncle Pelham had said that they were intending to do this in any event, and the sale of the château would compensate for their losses.

By the sound of it, her cousins Alexis and Lucy, too, were only mildly affected. Alexis had even spoken of raising the money to buy out Oliver's shareholding in Sky-Ways, but now it seemed as if his offer might not be necessary. Out of the blue, Henry Barratt, Oliver's partner, had had a telephone call from a man called Anthony Wisson who had somehow got word of the fact that it was Tetford money which had financed the airline, and of the collapse of the corporation. It seemed the financier was extremely anxious to buy Sky-Ways and wanted to meet Oliver to discuss the possible purchase. Zandra was far from sure what exactly a "financier" was, but she assumed he must be a wealthy old fuddy-duddy, and feared that he might well be as old-fashioned as her aunt and refuse to have a female pilot on his staff. Knowing he had arranged to meet Oliver at Sky-Ways the following morning, she was going to find out for herself what her own future prospects might be.

"I suppose I'll have to stop seeing you now our engagement has been broken off!"

Hugh's forlorn voice brought Zandra's thoughts back once more to the unhappy young man she had treated so cavalierly.

"We don't have to be so conventional about it, do we?" she said, more as a statement than a question. "There's no reason why we can't see each other just because we've decided not to get married after all. Why shouldn't we go on just as we have before?"

Hugh looked up eagerly.

"Gosh, Zandra, do you really think so? I shan't mind nearly so much if we can still see each other."

“Well, no one can stop us, can they?” Zandra said firmly. “Anyway, tomorrow is Sunday and you promised to drive me over to the airfield after church. There’s bound to be lots of people flying with the weather so perfect. Aunt Willow said I could go to early service tomorrow instead of matins. It’s such a dreadful waste of a whole morning sitting there listening to dull old Reverend Ellis’ dreary sermons. You will take me, won’t you, Hugh? I’d drive myself if only they’d let me. The chauffeur says I’m a really good driver and he isn’t a bit frightened even when I go fast. He’s teaching Jamie now and as soon as he’s learned, because he’s a boy, *he’ll* be allowed to go out on his own. It’s so unfair!”

Hugh felt obliged to protest.

“One would be frightfully worried about a girl going off on her own. Who would look after her if she broke down? Or was in a smash?”

Zandra’s blue eyes flashed and her mouth tightened in a stubborn line.

“Girls did much more dangerous things than driving by themselves in the war,” she said. “Lots of nurses were in the front lines! Lucy and Tante Silvie were!”

“Yes, and lots were killed!” Hugh said. “Anyway, we aren’t in the middle of a war now, Zandra, and it’s up to us chaps to look after you.”

Zandra gave a deep sigh. There seemed little point in continuing the discussion for Hugh’s parents were about as old-fashioned as her Aunt Willow. He’d never understood why she had been so against being presented and having a Season like all the other girls they knew. He’d agreed – albeit reluctantly – that she was right in a way when she said the *débutantes’* mothers were just trying to find eligible husbands for their daughters, and the Season was no different from a cattle market. But he’d been really shocked when she declared she didn’t want to be married and obliged to lead her husband’s life. “I want to be me before I am somebody’s wife and mother!” she had said; and this he had

almost certainly not understood. What else could a pretty girl like her want, he had asked? It was not as if she was one of those dreadfully brainy girls pursuing a career at university just as if they were men!

“You *will* take me to the airfield tomorrow, won’t you? I need you to look after me!” Zandra persisted in the soft appealing voice he was never able to resist. “Please, Hugh!”

It needed no further persuasion for Hugh to say yes.

Next morning, however, it seemed at first as if Hugh’s services would not be required after all. At breakfast, Oliver, who had spent the previous evening on the telephone, informed his mother that he was going to the airfield to meet the potential buyer of his shares.

“I do so wish it wasn’t necessary, my darling!” Willow said, her eyes distressed as she regarded her dearly loved son.

“He sounded a decent enough chap!” Oliver replied, putting his arm round her shoulders. “Of course, I’ve got to consider Henry. If I sell out, this Wisson fellow would be in control. If he looks as if he’s going to interfere too much in the way we run Sky-Ways, I may well reconsider Alexis” offer.

“Quite right, too! Thoroughly decent chap, young Barratt! Couldn’t have had a better partner,” Toby grunted.

Oliver nodded.

“We make a good team – and we were lucky, too, to have Lord Sharples as our chairman. We’d never have got off the ground without his business know-how. It’s a pity he died so soon afterwards! I must say, I’m very curious to know how Wisson got hold of his facts so quickly – quite a mystery. He’s pretty keen to buy – didn’t waste much time, and made an appointment to meet me – on a Sunday, too! He said he’s too busy to make it on a weekday!”

“So you really do intend to sell out your stake, Oliver?” Toby asked.

“If I can do so without it causing problems for Henry. As you know, he does hold forty per cent of the shares. A lot will depend

on what this Wisson chap is like, and if he wants to change our set-up. Henry has put as much time and effort into the business as I have – even if he wasn't able to anti the same amount of capital to start it up; so I owe it to him to consider his future as well as my own. We'll have to see what Wisson has in mind."

For once, Zandra curbed her tongue. If she were to remind Oliver that he had promised to give her an hour's spin in his newly acquired Gipsy Moth if the weather was good, he might tell her he did not want her at the airfield when so much of importance was happening. Far better, then, to just turn up with Hugh! There was always the chance that this Mr Anthony Wisson might be one of those old men who were susceptible to pretty girls, and she could charm him into employing her!

Having decided upon her tactics, she went upstairs and changed from the coat and skirt she had worn to church and donned a straight, camel-coloured wool dress with black jet buttons and two side pleats in the skirt. Tante Silvie had chosen it for her from Molyneux in Paris, and to Zandra's delight, it made her look older than her twenty years – and far more sophisticated.

Mollie, Zandra's personal maid, looked at her young mistress in astonishment as she brushed her page-boy bob and dabbed rouge on her cheeks before applying a cherry-red lipstick.

"You isn't going to the airfield like that, Miss Zandra, is you?" she asked. "Not in them high heels, any road!"

Zandra laughed.

"And why not, Mollie? You're as bad as Aunt Willow – telling me off for dressing like an aeroplane mechanic one minute and then complaining because I wear something decent for a change!"

Mollie handed Zandra her kid gloves, and gaped as she watched the girl pull on her fawn hat and fold back the brim at a jaunty angle.

"Why isn't you wearing your engagement ring, Miss Zandra?" she asked, and was surprised by Zandra's sudden grin.

“Because I’m not engaged any longer, Mollie. Mr Conway and I have decided we aren’t suited, so we’re just friends again. Now be a good girl and hand me my coat or Mr Conway will be here to collect me and I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

From her bedroom window, she had seen Oliver driving off in the Bentley and now she could see Hugh’s small, bull-nosed Morris coming up the driveway. She had not yet had a chance to tell him that as far as the family were concerned, they were no longer going to the airfield; that she had told Aunt Willow Hugh was taking her to lunch with his family. As a consequence of this fib, she dared not keep Hugh waiting lest he became embroiled in polite conversation with her aunt and let the cat out of the bag.

Poor old Hugh! she thought. He simply didn’t understand that it was sometimes necessary to tell white lies. He was probably relieved in some ways that they had broken off their engagement – the most momentous deceit in which she had so far involved him! She must remember to give him back his ring. It had belonged to Hugh’s spinster aunt whose fiancé had been killed in the war, and she had given it to Hugh for his future wife. It was safely wrapped in a handkerchief in the bottom of her black clutch handbag.

An hour later, Hugh was parking his car at Sky-Ways alongside Oliver’s Bentley and a large green Mercedes. It was an impressive vehicle and by the look of it, capable of considerable speed.

“Come on, Hugh!” Zandra urged her companion. “Let’s go and take a peek at Mr Wisson!”

“I don’t see how we can just barge in – I mean, it’s all right for you, Zandra – Lord Rochford is used to you being here, but . . .

Zandra drew an impatient sigh.

“Ollie won’t mind – and I do think it’s silly the way you keep calling him ‘Lord Rochford’; he’s only nine years older than you. You make him sound so stuffy! Anyway, if you don’t want to come in, you can stay here in the car.”

The November morning was bitterly cold and despite his

warm overcoat, Hugh shivered. Knowing Zandra, she could start chattering if a subject interested her and go on for hours. Sometimes he wondered if she had forgotten he was present! Reluctantly, he followed her into the building.

The outer office was empty of its usual scurrying members of staff and pilots, and was occupied only by a tall, fair-haired young man in a well-cut, dark grey suit and maroon silk tie. He rose at once as Zandra entered the room.

“Hallo!” she said, pausing to smile at the stranger. “Is my cousin, Lord Rochford, here? I haven’t met you before, have I? Are you Mr Wisson?”

A brief smile flitted across the young man’s pleasantly featured face; but he spoke with formal politeness as he said: “I’m Mr Anthony Wisson’s personal assistant – Guy Bristow. Lord Rochford is in conference with Mr Wisson in his inner sanctum!”

“I see! Actually, it isn’t my cousin’s ‘inner sanctum’ . . .” Her smile deepened as she echoed his words. “It’s used by both the directors and the senior pilot. I’m Zandra McGill, by the way, and this is Hugh Conway!” She turned to Hugh. “You can stay here with Mr Bristow. I’m going in to see Ollie!”

Guy Bristow, who had been about to draw back a chair for Zandra to sit on, lifted a restraining hand.

“I don’t think Mr Wisson wants to be . . . er, disturbed, Miss McGill,” he said awkwardly. “That’s to say, he told me to make sure he was not interrupted!”

Zandra’s chin lifted and she looked directly into the hazel eyes fastened so anxiously upon her.

“I’m here to see my cousin, Lord Rochford, not Mr Wisson, and I really don’t think I need anyone’s permission to do so.”

“I say, Zandra, if Mr Bristow has been instructed to keep everyone out, don’t you think . . . I mean, if it’s a private meeting—”

“Oh, stuff!” Zandra interrupted Hugh, her tone of voice giving no inkling of her inner misgivings. If this Mr Bristow had not virtually forbidden her to go in, she might well have waited for Oliver and his visitor to come out; but she saw his remark as

a challenge and she was not going to climb down now. In any event, Mr Wisson's "watchdog" might be obliged to take orders from his master – but she was not!

Before her courage could fail, she swept past him and with her head high, sailed into Oliver's office.

Both men stopped talking as Zandra entered. Oliver looked up at her in surprise from his chair behind his desk.

"Why, hallo, Zee-Zee! What are you doing here? And in that get-up? I thought you were lunching with Hugh's parents!"

Zandra went over and laid her arm affectionately around her cousin's shoulders. Deliberately, she avoided looking at the other man.

"We're going there later!" she said vaguely. "I wanted Hugh to see your new Puss Moth so we dropped by here first, and then I saw your car. I hope I'm not interrupting something important."

Oliver gave her a friendly hug.

"Well, you are, as a matter of fact, Zee-Zee. Let me introduce Mr Anthony Wisson. Mr Wisson, my cousin, Miss Zandra McGill."

As the man rose quickly to his feet and extended his hand, Zandra was struck first of all by the directness of his glance. The expression in his grey eyes was indefinable, and as he continued to hold her gaze, she felt her cheeks beginning to flush beneath his scrutiny. A dozen different thoughts chased across her mind: the first, that he was very far from being the "fuddy-duddy" old man she had expected; the second, that he was quite remarkably handsome. He was tall with a sweep of dark brown hair, a long aquiline nose and a firm, square jaw. His skin did not have the customary Englishman's winter pallor, but was lightly tanned.

"It's my pleasure, Miss McGill." His voice was deep, resonant. "Your interruption is quite timely, as it happens, for I think your cousin and I have concluded our discussion, have we not, Lord Rochford? To our mutual satisfaction, I am glad to say."

Most definitely to his own satisfaction, Anthony Wisson thought wryly, since he'd bought a controlling share in the airline for a great deal less than he had been prepared to pay.

Young Rochford had proved to be as naïve in business dealing as most of his class. Titled, born to wealth and privilege, money was something not, preferably, to be discussed in polite society, and at best, a somewhat embarrassing topic for discussion only when necessity required. Bargaining had not been on Rochford's agenda, and he had accepted the first figure he, Anthony, had proposed. With that easy, self-confident graciousness of his kind, Rochford had proffered his hand to shake on the deal, his brown eyes crinkling in a friendly smile.

Without warning, the face of Elerson Major flashed across Anthony Wisson's mind. It was all of twenty-three years ago that with the same casual smile, Elerson Major had selected him from among the group of new boys for his fag. He, Anthony, had been thirteen when his parents had plunged him into that unknown, unimaginable boarding-school life. Until then, his mother had tutored him, and because of the isolated life they led, he'd had no experience of the mores and hierarchy common to schoolboys. He had not even known what "fagging" entailed.

"What's your name, squirt?" Elerson asked.

"Antoni!" he answered in his ignorance.

"Not your Christian name, idiot. Don't you know we only use surnames?"

The other boys standing nearby sniggered.

"Antoni Wisniowiecki!"

Elerson grabbed his arm. He was no longer smiling.

"If that's supposed to be a joke, let me give you a word of warning, squirt. Cheeking us seniors will earn you a good thrashing. Now answer me properly. What's your name?"

"I just told you – Wisniowiecki! It's an ordinary Polish name!"

So at thirteen, he learned his first lesson – that he was never going to be accepted by his contemporaries as one of themselves because he was different. Because his parents were Polish, he was nicknamed "Poleski" although he had been born in England some years after his mother and father had immigrated and

become British citizens. It took him only a few months to correct his Polish accent and copy that of his schoolfellows, but there was nothing he could do to change his parents. God, how he'd hated them – his round, fat, balding father and his tall, thin mother in their drab, shabby clothes driving to school in their rattling old Talbot, jabbering away to one another in Polish as they always did when they spoke to him or to each other! Their obvious poverty was almost as great an embarrassment as their appearance and their continental volubility. It might not have been so bad if they had been prepared to remain quietly in the background; or if they had been wealthy, like Elerson's parents who arrived in the immaculate new Rolls-Royce motor called the "Silver Ghost". Elerson was one of the only three boys in the minor public school whose father was titled and a personal friend of the Duke of York which was enough to earn him a certain amount of respect.

It was the second lesson he, Anthony, had learned – that money and social position counted far more than brains, which he had in plenty; or even athletic ability, with which he had also been blessed.

The third lesson he learned in those first few weeks was never to believe another word his mother said. "*You are so clever, my precious Pumpkin . . . so handsome . . . so talented . . . you will be the most popular boy in the school. We are so proud of you, my darling!*"

Bitterly, he'd ripped the picture of himself standing between his two elderly parents from the silver frame his mother had saved so hard to buy. He tore it into tiny pieces and flushed it down the WC. A few weeks later, he sold the frame to another new boy who had an enlargement of his very English-looking father in shooting gear, a twelve-bore broken over one arm and four slaving black Labradors grouped at his feet beside a row of dead pheasants. The money augmented his meagre pocket-money which was proving totally inadequate for his needs at the tuck shop.

On his first night in the dormitory, he was fool enough to brag about the fact that his mother's family had been Polish

aristocrats. (He'd not then been aware that she had been disowned by her family for marrying his father who had been the family bailiff!) In the mistaken belief that brains and hard work were laudable characteristics, as he'd always been taught, he further bragged that his father, although arriving penniless in England, had worked his way up from a junior clerk in a munitions factory to become a senior accountant, a junior partner and finally the owner. The fact that the ultimate purchase of the factory had rendered Wisniowiecki senior on the verge of financial ruin, he had carefully omitted. He had not been believed. The sons of the mill and mine owners of this northern area of England who made up the bulk of the pupils were perfectly well aware that the parents of boys on bursaries were unable to afford the school fees and it followed therefore that Wisniowiecki senior could not own a factory. Wisniowiecki junior was branded a braggart and a liar. His shabby suitcase and his parents' rusty old car proved his poverty.

It was his fourth lesson – that people were judged on appearances rather than brains, and therefore appearances as well as class mattered.

Certainly, if appearances were not in this instance misleading, Rochford's cousin was everything he found most desirable in a female, Wisson thought now as he concentrated his attention on the girl who had just come into the room. He met her gaze with a friendly smile.

"May I ask you a question, Miss McGill? I am curious, you see, to know more of your interest in aeroplanes. Is this interest common to all the members of your family?"

Oliver laughed.

"Great Scott, no! There's my brother-in-law; and my young son, Giles, spends half his holidays down here. He's almost as keen as Zandra, who I might say, is an accomplished pilot. After a few more lessons with our chief engineer, she will probably know more about the inner workings of the Gipsy Moth than most of the chaps who fly it."

“So – I have the pleasure of speaking to that most rare of species – a mechanically minded, lady pilot!” Anthony Wisson’s voice was genuinely admiring but none the less sounded patronizing to Zandra who was stung to reply: “Do you see any reason why women should not fly an aeroplane – or drive a car – every bit as well as men, Mr Wisson?”

She had expected he might argue the point about the suitability of such taxing occupations for “the weaker sex”, but instead he merely smiled and said: “On the contrary, Miss McGill. I am a great admirer of the American lady, Miss Amelia Earhart, who I think has already proved the flying ability of the fair sex.”

Zandra felt herself relaxing and she smiled warmly, unaware of the effect this change of expression had upon the man regarding her.

“Then if you really are going to take over Oliver’s airline, will you fulfil his promise to me, Mr Wisson – to give me a job here at Sky-Ways? I promise you you wouldn’t regret it. I’ll—”

“Zee-Zee, you are a little minx!” Oliver broke in. “Mr Wisson and I have barely had the opportunity to discuss the future plans for Sky-Ways. We have yet to see what our respective accountants have to say, and I do assure you, Mr Wisson, that the future employment of my incorrigible young cousin is not a condition of sale!”

Anthony Wisson laughed.

“I did not suppose so, Lord Rochford. Nevertheless if our plans go ahead as I hope, I am quite prepared to find a place for so enterprising a young lady, if that is her wish. But don’t you have more pressing social engagements that would preclude regular employment, Miss McGill? I imagine that with your charm and accomplishments, you must be very much in demand by Society’s hostesses.”

“Oh, Zee-Zee could have been Deb of the Year if she’d wanted!” Oliver broke in easily. “But she wouldn’t allow my mother to launch her, would you, Zee-Zee? Mind you, I can’t say I blame her entirely. I did the Season’s débutante round one

year and most of the girls have nothing to talk about except parties and fashions.”

“Nevertheless, one can make some useful contacts on such occasions,” the older man said more to himself than in direct reply to Oliver. “However, I don’t doubt Miss McGill has enough admirers without having to be paraded before the eligible young men around town!”

“And she treats them shamelessly!” Oliver said with a grin. “What have you done with that unfortunate fiancé of yours, Zee-Zee?”

Zandra met Anthony Wisson’s amused glance with a wicked smile.

“I’ve left Hugh with your bodyguard!” she replied. “Your Mr Bristow did his best to stop me coming in here, Mr Wisson, so please don’t blame him for my barging in the way I did! And by the way, Ollie, Hugh isn’t my fiancé any more. We’ve broken off our engagement by mutual consent.”

“Have you now!” Oliver commented. “Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. Poor old Hugh!”

“One must have sympathy for anyone who loses your regard, Miss McGill!”

The look in Anthony Wisson’s eyes was unmistakable, for Zandra had seen it often enough in Léon’s to know when a man found her attractive. She felt a sudden thrill of excitement. The fact that Mr Wisson was quite a lot older than most of the young men she knew need not preclude her from enjoying a flirtation with him. It might be dangerous – but it would certainly be exciting.

“What a pity I have another engagement in London this afternoon!” he was saying, his eyes holding her own. “Otherwise the three of us might have enjoyed a celebratory lunch together. However, there will be other opportunities. Now I really should be on my way, Lord Rochford.”

As he bowed over Zandra’s gloved hand, she was convinced that he had pressed her fingers more tightly than was

customary. She was impatient now for him to be gone so that she could ask Oliver the multitude of questions that were milling in her mind. Who exactly *was* Mr Anthony Wisson? Was he married? Was he really going to buy a controlling interest in Oliver's airline? Had he meant it when he said he might give her a job? And most important of all, had he really found her attractive? That was something she could not ask Oliver, but it was a question to which she very badly wanted an answer – and for that answer to be yes.