

A DANGEROUS FORTUNE

KEN FOLLETT



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**KEN
FOLLETT**

**A DANGEROUS
FORTUNE**



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PROLOGUE

1866

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We can't," Edward said.

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

Edward looked scared. "It's the Striper if you're caught."

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

He looked at his roommate. Edward was not well liked at school: he was

too lazy to be a good student, too clumsy to do well in games and too selfish to make many friends. Micky was the only friend Edward had, and Edward hated Micky to spend time with other boys. "I'll see if Pilkington wants to go," Micky said, and he went to the door.

"No, don't do that," said Edward anxiously.

"I don't see why I shouldn't," said Micky. "You're too scared."

"I'm not scared," Edward said implausibly. "I've got to finish my Latin."

"Then finish it while I go swimming with Pilkington."

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

Micky opened the door. There was a low rumble of noise from the rest of the house, but no masters to be seen in the corridor. He darted into the next room. Edward followed.

"Hello, Hebrews," Micky said.

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

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

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

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

"Going swimming," said Micky.

"You'll be flogged."

Edward said plaintively: "I know."

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

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

"We'll probably be caught going back in," Edward said morosely.

Micky smiled at him. Edward was very English-looking, with straight fair

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

Edward grinned, mollified. “All right, let’s go.”

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

“We usually go to Scotland in August.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re not staying at school all through the vacation again?”

“I have to. I can’t go home. It takes six weeks one way—I’d have to start back before I got there.”

“By Jove, that’s hard.”

In fact Micky had no wish to go back. He loathed his home, and had done since his mother died. There were only men there now: his father, his older brother Paulo, some uncles and cousins, and four hundred cowboys. Papa was a hero to the men and a stranger to Micky: cold, unapproachable, impatient. But Micky’s brother was the real problem. Paulo was stupid but strong. He hated Micky for being smarter, and he liked to humiliate his little brother. He never missed a chance to prove to everyone that Micky could not rope steers

or break horses or shoot a snake through the head. His favorite trick was to scare Micky's horse so it would bolt, and Micky would have to shut his eyes tight and hang on, scared to death, while the horse charged madly across the pampas until it exhausted itself. No, Micky did not want to go home for the vacation. But he did not want to remain at school, either. What he really wanted was to be invited to spend the summer with the Pilaster family.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Micky saw a fourth boy. He was swimming on his own at the far end of the pool. He was older than the other three and did not seem to be with them. Micky could not see his face well enough to identify him.

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

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

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

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

"You'd better go back, before you're caught," Edward said. He picked up a

pair of trousers from the ground. “But don’t get your clothes wet, or everyone will know where you’ve been.” Then he threw the trousers into the middle of the pool and cackled with laughter.

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

Micky smiled, amused.

Edward picked up a boot and threw it in.

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

As Edward continued to throw boots and clothes into the water, Hugh Pilaster scrambled out of the pool. Micky expected him to make his escape, but unexpectedly he ran straight at Edward. Before Edward could turn around, Hugh gave him a mighty shove. Although Edward was much bigger, he was caught off balance. He staggered on the ledge then toppled over and fell into the pool with a terrific splash.

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

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

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

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

2

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

He waited, trying to calm his hoarse breathing and listen. His cousin Edward and Edward’s crony, Micky Miranda, were the worst beasts in the entire school: slackers, bad sports and bullies. The only thing to do was to keep out of their way. But he felt sure Edward would come after him. Edward

had always hated Hugh.

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

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

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

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

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

Hugh too had escaped, but he was not yet out of trouble. He had lost his underclothes, socks and boots. He would have to sneak into school in his soaking wet shirt and trousers and hope he would not be seen by a master or one of the senior boys. He groaned aloud at the thought. Why do things like this always happen to me? he asked himself miserably.

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

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

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

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

“What happened?” Hugh asked. “Where’s Peter?”

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

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

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

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

Tonio nodded. “All right,” he said dully.

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

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

“All clear,” he whispered. “Off we go!”

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

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

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

clenched involuntarily.

“Come here, Pilaster,” Mr. Offerton said.

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

“Headmaster’s study, right away,” said Mr. Offerton.

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

“Off you go!” the master said impatiently.

The two boys turned away, but Mr. Offerton said: “Not you, Silva.”

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

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

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

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

He was astonished to see his mother sitting there.

Worse yet, she was weeping.

“I only went swimming!” Hugh blurted out.

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

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

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

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

“Oh, Hugh,” she sobbed, “your father’s dead.”

3

SATURDAY WAS THE BEST DAY OF THE WEEK for Maisie Robinson. On Saturday Papa got paid. Tonight there would be meat for supper, and new bread.

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

The house was one of a row of damp, airless dwellings in the dockland neighborhood of a small town on the northeast coast of England. It belonged to Mrs. MacNeil, a widow. She lived in the front room downstairs. The Robinsons lived in the back room and another family lived upstairs. When it was time for Papa to arrive home, Mrs. MacNeil would be out on the doorstep, waiting to collect the rent.

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

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

"What did he say?"

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

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

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

Papa worked on the waterfront, in a high warehouse with the words "Tobias Pilaster & Co" in big letters over the gate. Maisie often wondered who Co was. Papa worked as a clerk, keeping records of the barrels of dyes that came in and out of the building. He was a careful man, a taker of notes and a maker of lists. Mama was the reverse. She had always been the daring one. It was Mama who wanted to come to England. Mama loved to make parties, go on trips, meet new people, dress up and play games. That was why Papa loved her so much, Maisie thought: because she was something he could never be.

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

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

She looked up and saw some men coming along the street in a knot. She wondered who they were. It was still a little too early for the dockworkers to be coming home. They were talking angrily, waving their arms and shaking their fists. As they came closer she recognized Mr. Ross, who lived upstairs and worked with Papa at Pilasters. Why was he not at work? Had they been sacked? He looked angry enough for that. He was red in the face and swearing, talking about stupid gits, lousy bleeders and lying bastards. When the group drew level with the house Mr. Ross left them abruptly and stomped inside, and Maisie and Danny had to dive out of the way to avoid his hobnailed boots.

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

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

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

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

“But why?” Mama said.

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

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

“The details I don’t know.”

“So you’ve got no work?”

“No work, and no pay.”

“But today they’ve paid you.”

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

Maisie looked at Danny again. This they understood. No money meant no

food for any of them. Danny looked scared. Maisie wanted to cry.

“They must pay you,” Mama whispered. “You worked all week, they have to pay you.”

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

“But Mr. Pilaster is a good man, you always said.”

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

“But how are we to feed our children?”

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

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

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

“We’ll have to run away,” Danny said.

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

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

Maisie didn’t care if she died, but a different thought occurred to her: Mama would surely starve herself to feed the children. If they stayed, she would die. They had to leave to save her. “You’re right,” Maisie said to Danny. “If we go, perhaps Papa will be able to find enough food for Mama. We’ve got to go, for her sake.” Hearing herself say the words, she was awestruck by what was happening to her family. It was worse even than the day they had left Viskis, with the village houses still burning behind them, and got on a cold train with all their belongings in two sailcloth bags; for then she had known that Papa would always look after her, no matter what else happened; and now she had to take care of herself.

“Where will we go?” she said in a whisper.

“I’m going to America.”

“America! How?”

“There’s a ship in the harbor that’s bound for Boston on the morning tide—I’ll shin up a rope tonight and hide on deck in one of the boats.”

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

“That’s right.”

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

He hesitated, then looked foolish and said: "I don't know."

She understood that she was not included in his plans, and she felt miserable and scared. "We're not going together, then," she said sadly.

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

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

"You can't. It's going to be hard enough anyway, to hide myself on the ship, and steal food and so on. I couldn't look after you too."

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

"I'd feel worried about you."

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

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

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

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

"Do you really mean it?"

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

They walked away side by side.

When they got to the end of the street she wanted to turn around and take a last look at the house; but she was afraid that if she did she would weaken; so

she walked on, and never looked back.

4

FROM *The Times*:

CHARACTER OF THE ENGLISH SCHOOLBOY.—*The Deputy-Coroner for Ashton, Mr. H. S. Wasbrough, held an inquest yesterday at the Station Hotel, Windfield, on the body of Peter James St John Middleton, aged 13, a schoolboy. The boy had been swimming in a pool at a disused quarry near Windfield School when two older boys had seen him apparently in difficulties, the court was told. One of the older boys, Miguel Miranda, a native of Cordova, gave evidence that his companion, Edward Pilaster, aged 16, stripped off his outer clothing and dived in to try to save the younger boy, but to no avail. The headmaster of Windfield, Dr Herbert Poleson, testified that the quarry was out of bounds to pupils, but he was aware that the rule was not always obeyed. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death by drowning. The Deputy-Coroner then called attention to the bravery of Edward Pilaster in trying to save the life of his friend, and said the character of the English schoolboy, as formed by such institutions as Windfield, was a thing of which we might justifiably feel proud.*

5

MICKY MIRANDA WAS CAPTIVATED by Edward's mother.

Augusta Pilaster was a tall, statuesque woman in her thirties. She had black hair and black eyebrows and a haughty, high-cheekboned face with a straight, sharp nose and a strong chin. She was not exactly beautiful, and certainly not pretty, but somehow that proud face was deeply fascinating. She wore a black coat and a black hat to the inquest, and that made her even more dramatic. And yet what was so bewitching was the unmistakable feeling she gave Micky that the formal clothes covered a voluptuous body, and the arrogant, imperious manner concealed a passionate nature. He could hardly take his eyes off her.

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

They were returning to the school in a carriage hired from the Station Hotel: Mr. and Mrs. Pilaster, Edward and Micky, and the headmaster, Dr. Poleson. Micky was amused to see that the headmaster was also bowled over by Augusta Pilaster. Old Pole asked if the inquest had tired her, inquired if she was comfortable in the carriage, ordered the coachman to go slower, and