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Opening extract from
The Edge of the Cloud

Written by
K.M. Peyton

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THE EDGE OF THE CLOUD

1912

Christina and Will have run away together, leaving the tense atmosphere of *Flambards* behind. Will is determined to fly one of the new aeroplanes that are all the rage now, in the early years of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Christina finds that people frown on a young girl working for a living.

Just as Christina starts to enjoy the long summer evenings at the airfield with Will, the tensions building in Europe cast an ominous shadow over their future together . . .

This is the second book in the *Flambards* series, which is set before, during, and after World War One.

Kathleen Peyton grew up in the London suburbs and always longed to live in the country and have a horse. Although she wrote stories for her own entertainment and had her first book published when she was fifteen, she always wanted to be a painter, and when she left school went to Kingston Art School and later, when her family moved, to Manchester Art School. Here she met her husband, Michael, a graphics artist and cartoonist. They have worked together all their lives, choosing to live in Essex in order to be near good sailing, and to London. They have two daughters.

And since she has made some money from publishing her books, Kathleen has always had a horse, or several.

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I

‘We’ve eloped,’ Christina said to Aunt Grace. She had not meant to use the silly word, but it had got stuck in her head, and she was too befuddled with cold to catch it before it slipped out.

Aunt Grace, standing in her dressing-gown on her Battersea doorstep, was understandably astonished. She had last seen Christina five years ago, when the child had been twelve, and William when he was a baby. The Rolls-Royce, parked beside the kerb, was no less a source of wonder.

‘Is that motor-car yours?’ she said to William.

‘I borrowed it,’ William said apologetically.

‘You’ve driven up from Flambards in it?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must be mad,’ Aunt Grace said. ‘And frozen to death. Come in, you silly children.’

It had been just past midnight when they had started out, skimming through the dark countryside, keyed up with love and excitement so that progress was like some mythical flight, all fire and gold, the motor a chariot, and they immortal . . . but now dawn showed a streaked sky and the factory chimneys were putting out streamers of smoke, the only banners of welcome; the cobbles were grey and greasy, the brick houses dingy, pointed with soot. Christina did not want to look. Real life was taking over too fast as it was. She was so cold that the clammy, gas-smelling embrace of Aunt Grace’s hall was almost welcoming.

‘The fires aren’t lit yet, only in the kitchen. Go through, dear. It’s nice and warm in there and I’ll make you some breakfast.’

The shiny linoleum, and the wallpaper with blue peacocks on it were completely familiar to Christina, as if she had never been away. William was right to have chosen Aunt Grace for refuge. Although surprised, she was entirely practical. Her life was in order, her house clean and neat, her advice would be to the point. Christina had no doubt that they were going to receive much advice before they were through. She looked at William, and he smiled at her, as if he was not worried at all. He looked very odd, with a white clean patch round his eyes where the goggles had been, and the rest of his face all grimy. Christina went on looking at him, amazed by what they had done.

‘Now tell me what this is all about,’ Aunt Grace said. ‘I hope you haven’t been very silly. Sit by the fire there. Get thawed out. The kettle won’t take a moment.’

She was at work already, laying cups and saucers on the scrubbed kitchen table. The kitchen was small, scrupulously tidy, and the range gave out a gorgeous warmth, burnishing the black-leading with a rosy glow. The kettle purred over the bars. Christina curled herself over the heat, opening her coat so that the crystal beads on her ball-dress winked and glittered.

Five years ago she had lived in this house. The fire was an embrace, unlocking tiny set-pieces of memory: crumpets in the sitting-room, when she was twelve, flames lighting spark patterns on the soot of the chimney back, and herself trying to tell her own fortune in them. Ever since the age of five, when her parents had been killed, she had been anxious—understandably—as to what was to become of her, and had looked for her fortune in every teacup, and every fireback. She had received scant comfort, shuttled from relative to relative, before coming to Aunt Grace, where she would have happily stayed. But family politics had decided otherwise.

'I hope,' Aunt Grace was saying, with a slight severity, 'that you have not lost your sense of responsibility. Your Uncle Russell has given you a home for the last five years: you owe him a great deal. I would have thought that his two boys would have become more like brothers to you in that length of time, than prospective husbands.'

'Only Will is a prospective husband, Aunt Grace.'

'The trouble was,' William put in, 'we both wanted her. But Mark, because he's the oldest, assumed she was going to marry him, and when she said she didn't want to, Mark was so furious that we decided to come away.'

'You may have been brought up in the country,' Aunt Grace said, 'but there is no need to talk like a farmer. You both *wanted* her, indeed! Elevate yourself from the level of the stockyard, William, and tell me how you intend to support Christina in the married state.'

Will smiled, unabashed.

'I shall get a job, Aunt Grace.'

'In what profession?'

'Flying.'

'Oh, good grief!' Aunt Grace was visibly shaken. She stared at William, seeing a tall, thin boy of eighteen with black hair and dark, intelligent eyes. He had a stiff leg, locked at the knee, yet moved with a remarkable rolling ease. She knew that he was phenomenally clever, unlike his brother Mark, and his obsession with flying-machines was not news to her. She knew he could fly, this curious, gangling boy: a rare accomplishment in this year of grace, nineteen hundred and twelve. But this was no recommendation when it came to thinking of a husband, the reverse if anything: flying was a shockingly dangerous sport. And eighteen! Aunt Grace pursed her lips.

'You're very young to be thinking of marriage, the two of you.' She shook some tea into the teapot.

'Oh, we know it will be years yet. Will has to work

things out,' Christina said. 'We have no plans, but you understand why we had to come away?'

'Because Mark asked you to marry him, you refused, he was furious—that is in character, as I remember Mark—and your further presence under the same roof threatened to be embarrassing? Yes, I understand. But why Will?'

'Why Will what, Aunt Grace?'

Did she not understand that they were in love? Christina looked up at her aunt, who had not loved for very many years, her husband having been run down by a horse-bus. Will, sensing Christina's mutiny, said hastily, 'But my father has thrown me out already, Aunt Grace. I left home two weeks ago. I only went back to take Christina to the Hunt Ball.'

'And why did Russell throw you out, may I ask?'

'Because he disapproves of my flying. He arranged to send me to British Columbia, so I left home.'

'Oh. And where have you been living since you left home?' Aunt Grace asked William.

'Around the aircraft sheds at Brooklands, and Eastchurch and that, looking for a job.'

'You've got one?'

'No. But I've got an interview at Farnborough on Monday.'

'Hmm.' Aunt Grace, having marshalled most of the relevant facts, poured out three cups of tea and cut some bread to make toast. Christina, basking over the fire, threw back her coat and straightened up to reach for her tea. Aunt Grace, glancing at the bare, white shoulders, the arms hard with holding the strength of her Uncle Russell's hunters, the hair tumbling in a thick brown tangle over the nape of her neck, was not surprised at the desires of the Russell boys. Christina was no conventional beauty: she was too firm and strong and straight. Looking at her,

Aunt Grace could well believe that she was a fine horsewoman, in the Russell tradition—her occasional letters had been full of horse news and hunting tales. She could well believe too, looking at her stubborn mouth and slightly wary eyes, that Christina was used to working out her own salvation. At Flambards, no doubt, she had no option. She had never known a mother, or comfort, in the ordinary sense. She had learned to look after herself. Aunt Grace liked Christina, basically. She was in the Russell mould, after her mother. Aunt Grace did not want things to go wrong for Christina.

‘I’ve no doubt,’ she said, ‘everything will work itself out. It all depends upon yourselves. I think you need some sleep, before you start making plans. And some boiled eggs.’

They had known Aunt Grace was sensible. They had been right to rely on her. Christina found it hard to believe, knowing Aunt Grace in her Battersea setting, that she had been a girl at Flambards, and had hunted the corn-fed hunters over the same Essex fields as herself, that she knew the park and the chestnut trees and the rookery and the over-grown pink roses just as she knew them herself. Christina was so tired that the roses and the horses and the boiled eggs all went round together in front of her eyes. Almost immediately, it seemed, she was being tucked into bed with a hot bottle for company. The sheets were stiff and clean as no Flambards sheets had been for years, the mattress feathers soft, lapping her like a swan its ducklings. Christina slept, oblivious of her new love and life.

Aunt Grace, having already slept, was by no means as oblivious. She sat in the kitchen, stirring her cup of tea (after dispatching William to drive his Rolls-Royce up to the bus stables and get it locked in a cart shed—Aunt Grace knew the little boys of Battersea). She was a resilient

woman, very hard and at the same time very human; this sudden predicament of her brother's son and her sister's daughter both worried her, and touched her. Marriage, at their age! She did not think either of them knew what love was about; yet—knowing her brother Russell's tyrannical nature—she could well understand their running away to work out a solution of their own. One could scarcely work out so delicate a relationship in the charged atmosphere of Russell's disapproval. Russell was a violent man when crossed, and Aunt Grace knew that Russell had intended Christina to marry Mark, not William. Mark was his favourite, a handsome, ignorant, hard-riding boy who was in both looks and temperament the image of his father. Mark was to inherit Flambards, and carry on the stables, whose hunters were second to none in Essex, and to do this he needed money. Christina, when she was twenty-one, would have money, having been left a considerable amount by her father. Aunt Grace knew that it was to this end alone that Russell had demanded that Christina be brought up at Flambards. Living in a bygone age, he was still of the opinion that young people married whoever was allotted them, and he had arranged that Christina would marry Mark.

Aunt Grace smiled with a somewhat feline satisfaction. No doubt all was not peace in the Flambards household this morning. She was only relieved that Russell's physical state—for he had been crippled in a hunting accident—assured that he would not arrive in pursuit on her doorstep.

'So,' she said to William, when he returned, 'you have set yourself some problems. I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Yes, Aunt Grace. If only Christina can stay here until I get a job and earn some money—it won't be long—then we shall be all right.'

‘They’ll give you a job, with that stiff leg of yours?’

William’s expression changed. ‘It makes no difference,’ he said shortly.

‘Hmm.’ Aunt Grace’s bluntness was no surprise to William, for he had heard of it from Christina, but his expression darkened still further when she said, ‘You’re not after Christina’s money?’

‘By the time she comes into her money I shall have made plenty of money of my own,’ he said stiffly.

‘Don’t take offence, silly boy. I’m only your aunt. I’m entitled to ask questions like that. Surely money is a subject of perennial interest?’

‘Yes. Yes, of course.’ William had to admit the truth of her remark. He had two sovereigns in his pocket, and would have no more till he earned some. During the last two weeks he had known hunger for the first time in his life.

‘You need some sleep.’ Aunt Grace got up from the table. ‘There’s a bed in my sewing-room. I shan’t be working in there this morning. Come along. I’ll show you.’

And William was pleased to feel that, for the next few hours, there would be no need to think.

Christina awoke at four in the afternoon, heavy with dreams of Flambards. The wind and rain were blowing about the black branches of the chestnut-trees and bending the dead yellow grass in the park; the wind was in the horses’ tails, and in their demeanour, so that they kept skipping and joggling and reaching out with impatience . . . She opened her eyes and saw the rain running down the sooty window glass. ‘Will! Oh, Will!’ she cried out, and stretched out her arms as if she expected to find him lying beside her. But the sheets beyond the little cave of her body warmth were bare and cold, and she remembered

that she had not so much as kissed him yet, and this was Battersea. Here the horses were in coster carts and the chestnuts behind park palisades. Will was drinking tea in the kitchen with Aunt Grace. No, it's late, she thought. The wet sky had a wedge of pink sunset in it, tremulous and tear-stained. The clouds were ragged with wind . . . no wonder the horses were so wild . . .

Christina raised herself up on her elbows and shook back the weight of her hair. She looked again at the rain on the window, and saw that there was no beauty in it. She was awake now, remembering what she had done. There were no horses.

She looked round cautiously. This was the room she had slept in when she was twelve, a high, narrow room with a big brass bed and a marble-topped washstand, and cold linoleum on the floor. There was only one chair, and over it her lovely pink ball-dress, the only dress she now possessed. The night of the ball seemed ten years ago. Yet this time yesterday, she thought, I hadn't even started dressing for it. I didn't even know if Will would come. Certainly she had never guessed that they would run away from the ball together like fairy-tale lovers. It was very hard, now, to remember how it had come about, very hard to recall that mixture of delirious, swooning excitement and needle-sharp fear, the atmosphere of champagne and camellias, and the scrunching of the motor wheels on the gravel. 'But it happened,' she said to herself, 'or I wouldn't be here now.'

Lying in bed, she felt now very different from how she had felt last night. It's the smell of polish, and gasometers, she thought. But she knew now that she was afraid of what she had done, not afraid of loving Will, but of having turned herself out of Flambards, which was the only real home she had ever known. She had nothing, now. Only Aunt Grace's charity. She could not get out of

bed, because she did not even have a dress to wear for everyday.

I shall have to get a job, like Will, she thought. But the only thing she could do well was ride a horse. Aunt Grace will make me sew, she thought, for Aunt Grace was a dressmaker by trade, and Christina remembered how she had sewed when she was twelve, hour after hour in the morning-room downstairs, listening to the putter of the gas and the horses' hooves clopping slackly on the road outside, and the coal falling in the grate. Thinking of it, she tried not to shiver a little. Her hands were coarse with holding Uncle Russell's horses. She was used to the wet fields and the mud flying, and the rain in her face.

'Oh, you're awake. Good.' Aunt Grace's face appeared round the door. 'I've been looking out some clothes for you. I think these will do.' From an armful which consisted mostly of sensible drawers and camisoles and petticoats she shook out a fawn crêpe blouse with a high neck and buttoned cuffs, and a long, dark-brown serge walking skirt.

'I'll fetch you a jug of hot water, dear.' She laid the clothes out on the chair.

'Is Will up?'

'He was up an hour ago, dear. I gave him a meal and he left about ten minutes ago.'

Christina shot up in bed. 'Left!'

'Yes, dear.'

'Where's he gone?'

'To Farnborough, he said. His appointment is in the morning, and he said he'd rather be there the night before, just in case he had trouble with the motor-car.'

'Oh!' Christina's voice was almost a wail. 'He—oh, I'd forgotten—of course, it's Sunday now. Oh, I wish he'd said goodbye!'

'I looked in, dear, but you were asleep.' Aunt Grace

disappeared, and Christina threw herself back into the pillows and moaned softly to herself, 'Oh, Will, I want you here!' It was only because he had gone away, in the first place, that she had discovered that she loved him. At least, knowing little of love, she supposed that the pain of the parting meant that she was in love. This pain, compounded of frustration and loneliness, shot through with nerve-flicking stabs of doubt and seamed with chasms of confusion, had dogged her for the whole fortnight before the ball, and was so familiar to her that she recognized the symptoms of its recurrence immediately. She wanted to cry with disappointment. Where was romance now, in the cold house of her great-aunt? Her eyes fell bitterly on the sensible underwear and the sombre skirt. The ball-dress had fallen off the chair out of sight, as if quenched by the stark uniform of everyday. It symbolized exactly Christina's feelings.

But no one, Christina knew—as she lay back staring at the grey ceiling—was going to make things any different for her. She had been brave last night, running away, because it had been easy. But now, in the wet spring dusk of a Battersea Sunday evening, she needed courage, and there was none in her. Her mind was full of her dreams of Flambards and, just as she had loved William when he had gone away, so now with a capriciousness that enraged her she found herself feeling desperately homesick.

'You're mad!' she said to herself. 'You don't know what you want! You never loved Flambards when you were there!'

But this ache was something compounded of every love and every pain she had ever remotely known; it was a homesickness for something she did not even know.

'Here's the water, dear. When you're ready there's a nice tea waiting.'

Christina felt that Aunt Grace was glad that William had gone, and that the two of them were cosily together, like old times. She was not used to men. Nor am I, Christina thought, not in this new way. She steeled herself to get out of bed, not to cry. Her warm feet flinched on the linoleum, like the feel of a horse going to refuse. Horses have courage, Christina thought. They have to do whatever is asked of them, however hard. She would have to be a horse. She had stopped the threat of tears now. She could face the serge skirt and the drab blouse. Aunt Grace was kind. If there had been no Aunt Grace, then she would have had cause to be afraid. By the time she had dressed she had found what she supposed was courage, a sort of numb resignation. (She had seen that in horses too.) She thought of Will, driving through the dusk with the awkwardness of his leg making him swear, his head full of his aeroplane dreams, and went down to tea with Aunt Grace. The velour curtains were drawn. There was toast on the brass tripod in front of the fire, and seedcake in slices. The room was very small, after Flambards, but warm, with none of Flambards' whistling draughts. There was a thick curtain on a brass rail over the door, and a velvet sausage hanging on a cord over the keyhole, and another at the foot of the door. Christina felt sealed in, a prisoner amongst the bric-à-brac of Aunt Grace's possessions. The only way out was with the flames up the chimney. Aunt Grace, having had all day to consider the significance of the events, seemed at ease.

'Perhaps it will be as well that you've left Flambards,' she said. 'A young girl needs to see a little city life. There is plenty here for you to do, and I shall enjoy your company. You will have to write to Russell and smooth him over. There is no need to mention Will. After all, you're much too young to be engaged, especially as Will has no prospects.'

'I only came away to be with Will,' Christina said, all the agony coming back with a rush. 'I—'

'Will has to make his way. He will not do it overnight. You must have patience, Christina. After all, you cannot get married without Russell's permission until you are both twenty-one, and I cannot see him giving it. And Will has chosen a very precarious career . . . however did he come to get interested in flying?'

'A man at home—a neighbour—has built an aeroplane, and Will helped him, and flew it for him. Mr Dermot—' Christina tried not to choke on the memory of Mr Dermot, who was more of a father to Will than his own had ever been. 'When Uncle Russell found out about Mr Dermot, he said Will must go to British Columbia, to some relation—he forbade him to see Mr Dermot again. He said he would prosecute Mr Dermot otherwise. So Will left home.'

'How can Will fly an aeroplane when he has a stiff leg?'

'He flew Mr Dermot's all right.'

'He ought to see a doctor. It could very possibly be put right.'

'They said it would never be right again.' Christina felt the room closing in on her again. Aunt Grace's brisk words did not allow for dreams. She felt stifled.

'Have some toast,' Aunt Grace ordered.

When the tea was finished and cleared away, Aunt Grace got out a workbox and started to sew. After half an hour she suggested to the silent Christina that she might like to help with some lace insertions, and in another five minutes Christina was sewing too. She bent her head very low over the work, and her whole being cried out, 'I can't bear it! I can't bear it!' But she said nothing, and sewed until it was time for bed.