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Upon her butler's announcing the arrival of Mr Ravenscar, Lady Mablethorpe, who had been dozing over a novel from the Circulating Library, sat up with a jerk, and raised a hand to her dishevelled cap. 'What's that you say? Mr Ravenscar? Desire him to come upstairs at once.'

While the butler went to convey this message to the morning-caller, her ladyship tidied her ruffled person, fortified herself with a sniff at her vinaigrette, and disposed herself on the sofa to receive her guest.

The gentleman who was presently ushered into the room was some twenty years her junior, and looked singularly out of place in a lady's boudoir. He was very tall, with a good pair of legs, encased in buckskins and topboots, fine broad shoulders under a coat of superfine cloth, and a lean, harsh-featured countenance with an uncompromising mouth and extremely hard grey eyes. His hair, which was black, and slightly curling, was cut into something perilously near a Bedford crop. Lady Mablethorpe, who belonged to an older generation, and herself continued to make free use of the pounce-box, in spite of Mr Pitt's iniquitous tax on hair-powder, could never look upon the new heads without a shudder. She shuddered now, as her affronted gaze took in not only her nephew's abominable crop but also the careless set of his coat, his topboots, the single spur he wore, and the negligent way he had tied his cravat, and thrust its ends through a gold-edged buttonhole. She raised the vinaigrette to

her nostrils again, and said in a fading voice: 'Upon my word, Max! Whenever I clap eyes on you I fancy I can smell the stables!'

Mr Ravenscar strolled across the room, and took up a position with his back to the fire. 'And can you?' he enquired amiably.

Lady Mablethorpe chose to ignore this exasperating question. 'Why, in the name of heaven, only one spur?' she demanded.

'That's the high kick of fashion,' said Ravenscar.

'It makes you look for all the world like a postilion.'

'It's meant to.'

'And you know very well that you do not care a snap for the fashion! I beg you will not teach Adrian to make such a vulgar spectacle of himself!'

Mr Ravenscar raised his brows. 'I'm not likely to put myself to so much trouble,' he said.

This assurance did nothing to mollify his aunt. She said severely that the fashion of waiting upon ladies in garments fit only for Newmarket was not one which she had until this day encountered.

'I've this instant ridden into town,' said Mr Ravenscar, with an indifference which robbed his explanation of all semblance of apology. 'I thought you wanted to see me.'

'I have been wanting to see you these five days and more. Where in the world have you been, tiresome creature? I drove round Grosvenor Square, only to find the house shut up, and the knocker off the door.'

'I've been down at Chamfreys.'

'Oh, indeed! Well, I'm sure I hope you found your Mama in good health – not but what it's the height of absurdity to call Mrs Ravenscar your mother, for she's no such thing, and of all the foolish –'

'I don't,' said Ravenscar briefly.

'Well, I hope you found her in good health,' repeated Lady Mablethorpe, a trifle disconcerted.

'I didn't find her at all. She is at Tunbridge Wells, with

Arabella.’

At the mention of her niece, Lady Mablethorpe’s eyes brightened. ‘The dear child!’ she said. ‘And how is she, Max?’

The thought of his young half-sister appeared to afford Mr Ravenscar no gratification. ‘She’s a devilish nuisance,’ he replied.

A shade of uneasiness crossed her ladyship’s plump countenance. ‘Oh, indeed? Of course, she is very young, and I daresay Mrs Ravenscar indulges her more than she should. But –’

‘Olivia is as big a fool as Arabella,’ responded Ravenscar shortly. ‘They are both coming up to town next week. The 14th Foot are stationed near the Wells.’

This grim pronouncement apparently conveyed a world of information to Lady Mablethorpe. After a somewhat pensive pause, she said: ‘It is time dear Arabella was thinking of marriage. After all, *I* was married when I was scarce –’

‘She never thinks of anything else,’ said Ravenscar. ‘The latest is some nameless whelp in a scarlet coat.’

‘You ought to keep her more under your eye,’ said his aunt. ‘You are as much her guardian as Mrs Ravenscar.’

‘I’m going to,’ said Ravenscar.

‘Perhaps if we could marry her suitably –’

‘My dear ma’am,’ said Mr Ravenscar impatiently, ‘Arabella is no more fit to be married than if she were still in long coats! I have it from Olivia that she has been head over ears in love with no fewer than five aspiring gentlemen in as many months.’

‘Good God, Max! If you don’t take care, we shall have some dreadful fortune-hunter running off with her!’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me at all.’

Lady Mablethorpe showed slight signs of agitation. ‘You are the most provoking creature! How can you talk in that cool way about such a disastrous possibility?’

‘Well, at least I should be rid of her,’ said Mr Ravenscar callously. ‘If you’re thinking of marrying her to Adrian, I can tell you now that –’

‘Oh, Max, that is what I wanted to see you about!’ interrupted his aunt, recalled by the mention of her son’s name to the more pressing problem of the moment. ‘I am quite distracted with worry!’

‘Oh?’ said Ravenscar, with casual interest. ‘What’s the young fool been doing?’

Lady Mablethorpe bristled instinctively at this uncomplimentary description of her only child, but a moment’s reflection brought the unwelcome conviction that the slighting term had been earned. ‘He thinks he is in love,’ she said tragically.

Mr Ravenscar was unmoved. ‘He’ll think it a good many times for the next five or six years. How old is the cub?’

‘Considering you are one of his trustees, you surely know that he is not yet twenty-one!’

‘Forbid the banns, then,’ recommended Mr Ravenscar flippantly.

‘I wish you will be serious! This is no laughing matter! He will be of age in a couple of months now! And before we know where we are we shall have him married to some scheming hussy!’

‘I should think it extremely unlikely, ma’am. Let the boy alone. Damme, he must cut his milk teeth sometime!’

Lady Mablethorpe flushed angrily. ‘It is all very well for you to stand there, talking in that odious way, as though you did not care a fig, but —’

‘I’m only responsible for his fortune,’ he said.

‘I might have known you would have come here only to be disagreeable! Wash your hands of my poor boy by all means: I’m sure it’s only what I expected. But don’t blame *me* if he contracts the most shocking misalliance!’

‘Who is the girl?’ asked Mr Ravenscar.

‘A creature — oh, a *hussy*! — out of a gaming-house!’

‘*What?*’ demanded Ravenscar incredulously.

‘I thought you would not be quite so cool when you heard the full sum of it!’ said her ladyship, with a certain morbid satisfaction. ‘I was never so appalled in my life as when I heard of it! I went immediately to your house. Something must be

done, Max!’

He shrugged. ‘Oh, let him amuse himself! It don’t signify. She may cost him less than an opera-dancer.’

‘She will cost him a great deal more!’ said her ladyship tartly. ‘He means to marry the creature!’

‘Nonsense! He’s not such a fool. One does not marry women out of gaming-houses.’

‘I wish you will tell him so, for he will pay no heed to anything I say. He will have us believe that the girl is quite something out of the common way, if you please. Of course, it is as clear as daylight. The dear boy is as innocent as a lamb, and full of the most nonsensical romantic notions! That hateful, vulgar, scheming woman lured him to her house, and the niece did the rest. You may depend upon it she meant to have him from the start. Sally Repton tells me that it is positively absurd to see how Adrian worships the wench. There is no doing anything with him. She will have to be bought off. That is why I sent for you.’ She observed a distinctly saturnine look in Mr Ravenscar’s eye, and added with something of a snap: ‘You need not be afraid, Max! I hope I know better than to expect you to lay out any of *your* odious wealth on the business!’

‘I hope you do, aunt, for I shall certainly do no such thing.’

‘It would be a very odd thing if anyone were to ask you to,’ she said severely. ‘Not but what you would scarcely notice the expenditure, as wealthy as you are. Indeed, I cannot imagine how you contrive to spend the half of your income, and I must say, Max, that nobody would suppose, from the appearance you present, that you are quite the richest man in town.’

‘Are you complimenting me upon my lack of ostentation, ma’am?’

‘No, I am not,’ said her ladyship acidly. ‘There is nothing I have ever felt the least desire to compliment you on. I wish to heaven there were someone other than yourself to whom I could turn in this fetch. You are hard, and unfeeling, Max, and excessively selfish.’

He sought in the recesses of his pocket for his snuff-box, and

drew it out, and opened it. ‘Try Uncle Julius,’ he suggested.

‘That old woman!’ exclaimed Lady Mablethorpe, disposing of her brother-in-law in one contemptuous phrase. ‘Pray, what could he do to the purpose?’

‘Sympathize with you,’ said Mr Ravenscar, taking snuff. He saw the vinaigrette come into play, and shut his snuff-box with a snap. ‘Well, you had better tell me who this Cyprian of Adrian’s is.’

‘She is that vulgar Lady Bellingham’s niece – or so they pretend,’ answered Lady Mablethorpe, abandoning the vinaigrette. ‘You must know Eliza Bellingham! She keeps a gaming-house in St James’s Square.’

‘One of the Archer-Buckingham kidney?’

‘Precisely so. Well, I don’t say she is as bad as that precious pair, for, indeed, who could be? – but it’s all the same. She was Ned Bellingham’s wife, and I for one never thought her good *ton* at all, while we all know what Bellingham was!’

‘I seem to be singularly ignorant.’

‘Oh well, it was before your day! It doesn’t signify, for he’s been dead these fifteen years: drank himself into his grave, though they called it an inflammation of the lungs – fiddle! Of course he left her with a pile of debts, just as anyone might have expected. I’m sure I don’t know how she contrived to live until she started her wretched gaming-house: I daresay she might have rich relatives. But that’s neither here nor there. You may see her everywhere; she rents her box at the opera, even! but no person of *ton* will recognize her.’

‘How does she fill her house, then? I suppose it is the usual thing? – Discreet cards of invitation, handsome supper, any quantity of inferior wine, E.O. and faro-tables set out above-stairs?’

‘I was referring to ladies of breeding,’ said his aunt coldly. ‘It is well known, alas, that gentlemen will go anywhere for the sake of gaming!’

He made her a slight, ironical bow. ‘Also, if my memory serves me, Lady Sarah Repton.’

‘I make no excuse for Sally. But duke’s daughter or not, I

should never think of describing her as of good *ton!*'

He looked faintly amused. 'I wish you will enlighten me: do you recognize her?'

'Don't be absurd, I beg of you! Naturally Sally has the *entrée* everywhere. Eliza Bellingham is quite another matter, and you may depend upon it that although Sally may go to her house, she does not set foot in Sally's! It was Sally who warned me of what was going forward. As you may suppose, I immediately taxed Adrian with it.'

'That is what I supposed,' agreed Mr Ravenscar, looking sardonic.

Lady Mablethorpe cast him a glance of scornful dislike. 'You need not imagine that I am a fool, Max. Of course I went tactfully about the business, never supposing for an instant that I should discover the affair to be more than a – than a – Well, you know what anyone would expect, hearing that a young man had become enamoured of a wench from a gaming-house! You may conceive my dismay when Adrian at once, and without the least hesitation, informed me that he was indeed madly in love with the girl, and meant to marry her! Max, I was so taken aback that I could not utter a word!'

'Has he taken leave of his senses?'

demanded Mr Ravenscar.

'He is just like his father,' said Lady Mablethorpe, in a despairing way. 'Depend upon it, he has taken some romantic maggot into his head! You know how he was for ever reading tales of chivalry, and such nonsense, when he was a boy! This is what comes of it! I wish I had sent him to Eton.'

Mr Ravenscar raised his eyes, and thoughtfully contemplated the portrait which hung on the wall opposite to him. It depicted a young man in a blue coat, who looked out of the picture with a faint smile in his fine eyes. He was a handsome young man, hardly more than a boy. He wore his own fair hair tied in the nape of his neck, and supported his chin on one slender, beautiful hand. His expression was one of great sweetness, but there was a hint of obstinacy in the curve of his lips, at odd variance with the dreamy softness of his eyes.

Lady Mablethorpe followed the direction of her nephew's gaze, and herself studied, with misgiving, the portrait of the 4th Viscount. A despondent sigh escaped her; she transferred her attention to Mr Ravenscar. 'What's to be done, Max?' she asked.

'He can't marry the wench.'

'Will you speak to him?'

'Certainly not.'

'It is very difficult to do so, I own, but he might be brought to attend to you.'

'I can conceive of nothing more unlikely. What figure will you go to to buy the girl off?'

'No sacrifice would be too great to save my son from such an entanglement! I shall rely on you, for I know nothing of such matters. Only rescue the poor boy!'

'It will go very much against the grain,' said Ravenscar grimly.

Lady Mablethorpe stiffened. 'Indeed! Pray, what may you mean by that?'

'A constitutional dislike of being bled, ma'am.'

'Oh!' she said, relaxing. 'You may console yourself with the reflection that it is I, not you, being bled.'

'It is a slight consolation,' he admitted.

'I have not the least doubt that you will find the girl rapacious. Sally tells me that she is at least five years older than Adrian.'

'She's a fool if she accepts less than ten thousand,' said Ravenscar.

Lady Mablethorpe's jaw dropped. 'Max!'

He shrugged. 'Adrian is not precisely a pauper, my dear aunt. There is also the title. Ten thousand.'

'It seems wicked!'

'It is wicked.'

'I should like to strangle the abominable creature!'

'Unfortunately, the laws of this land preclude your pursuing that admirable course.'

'We shall have to pay,' she said, in a hollow voice. 'It would be

useless, I am persuaded, to appeal to the woman.'

'You would make a great mistake to betray so much weakness.'

'Nothing would induce me to speak to such a woman! Only fancy, Max! she presides over the tables in that horrid house! You may imagine what a bold, vulgar piece she is! Sally says that all the worst rakes in town go there, and she bestows her favours on such men as that dreadful Lord Ormskirk. He is for ever at her side. I daresay she is more to him than my deluded boy dreams of. But it is useless to suggest such a thing! He fired up in an instant.'

'Ormskirk, eh?' said Ravenscar thoughtfully. 'That settles it: any attempt to bring to reasonable terms a lady in the habit of encouraging his attentions would certainly be doomed to failure. I had thought better of Adrian.'

'You can't blame him,' said Lady Mablethorpe. 'What experience has he had of such people? Ten to one, the girl told him some affecting story about herself! Besides, she is quite lovely, according to what Sally Repton says. I suppose there is no hope of her deciding in Ormskirk's favour?'

'Not the smallest chance of it, I imagine. Ormskirk won't marry her.'

Lady Mablethorpe showed signs of dissolving into tears. 'Oh, Max, what is to be done if she won't relinquish him?'

'She must be made to relinquish him.'

'If it were not for the unsettled state of everything on the Continent, I should feel inclined to send him abroad! Only I daresay he would refuse to go.'

'Very likely.'

Lady Mablethorpe dabbed at her eyes. 'It would kill me if my son were to be caught by such a female!'

'I doubt it, but you need not put yourself about, ma'am. He will not be caught by her.'

She was a little comforted by this pronouncement. 'I knew I could rely upon you, Max! What do you mean to do?'

'See the charmer for myself,' he replied. 'St James's Square,

you said?’

‘Yes, but you know how careful these houses have to be, Max, on account of the law-officers. I daresay they won’t admit you, if you have no card.’

‘Not admit the rich Mr Ravenscar?’ he said cynically. ‘My dear aunt! I shall be welcomed with open arms.’

‘Well, I hope they won’t fleece you,’ said Lady Mablethorpe.

‘On the contrary, you hope they will,’ he retorted. ‘But I am a very ill bird for plucking.’

‘If Adrian meets you there, he will suspect your purpose. He will certainly think that I sent you.’

‘Deny it,’ said Ravenscar, bored.

Lady Mablethorpe started to deliver herself of an improving lecture on the evils of deception, but, finding that her nephew was quite unimpressed, stopped, and said with a somewhat vindictive note in her voice: ‘I beg that you will take care, Max! They say the girl is like a honey-pot, and I’m sure I’ve no wish to see *you* caught in her toils.’

He laughed. ‘There is not the slightest need for you to concern yourself about me, ma’am. I am neither twenty years of age, nor of a romantic disposition. You had better not tell Adrian that I have been here. No doubt I shall see him in St James’s Square this evening.’

She held out her hand to him, a good deal mollified. ‘You are a most provoking man, Max, but indeed I don’t know what I should do without you! You will manage it all: I depend entirely upon you!’

‘For once,’ said Mr Ravenscar, raising her hand formally to his lips, ‘you may quite safely do so.’

He took his leave of her, and departed. She opened her book again, but sat for a few moments gazing into the fire, her mind pleasantly occupied with daydreams. Once extricated from his present predicament, she had great hopes that her son would have learnt his lesson, and keep clear of any further entanglements. The account Ravenscar had brought of his half-sister’s activities had not been entirely palatable, but Lady Mablethorpe

was a broad-minded woman, disinclined to set much store by the vagaries of a young lady of only eighteen summers. To be sure, it was unfortunate that Arabella should be such a flirt, but what, in another damsel, would have been a shocking fault, was, in such a notable heiress, a mere whimsicality of youth. Flirt or not, Lady Mablethorpe had every intention of seeing Arabella married to her son. Nothing, she thought, could be more suitable. Arabella had birth, fortune, and prettiness; she had known her cousin intimately since babyhood, and would make him a very good wife. Lady Mablethorpe had not the smallest objection to the child's liveliness: she thought it very taking, coupled, as it had always been, with a graceful, playful deference towards her aunt.

The recollection of the nameless suitor in a scarlet coat momentarily disturbed her ladyship's complacent dream. She soon banished it, reflecting that Max could be counted upon to put a stop to any such nonsense. Callous he might be, but he was not at all the man to stand idle while Arabella bestowed herself and her eighty thousand pounds on some nobody in a line regiment. For herself, Lady Mablethorpe was obliged to admit that it would be a shocking thing for Arabella to bestow these rich gifts on any other man than young Lord Mablethorpe.

She was not, she insisted, a mercenary woman, and if her dearest boy disliked his cousin she would be the last to urge him into matrimony with her. But eighty thousand pounds, safely invested in the Funds! Any woman of common prudence must wish to see this fortune added to the family coffers, particularly since (if Max were to be believed) the staggering sum of ten thousand pounds would shortly have to be disgorged from the amassed interest of Adrian's long minority. In this connection, thought her ladyship, it was a fortunate circumstance that the conduct of all the business of the Mablethorpe estate had been left in Max's capable hands rather than in the Honourable Julius Mablethorpe's. There was no doubt that Max had a very shrewd head on his shoulders. Thanks, in a great measure, to his management, Adrian would find himself when he came of age

(and in spite of the loss of that ten thousand pounds) the master of a very pretty fortune. It would not compare, of course, with the Ravenscar wealth, a melancholy circumstance which had for years caused her ladyship a quite irrational annoyance. She had even, upon occasion, wished that she had a daughter who might have married Max.

She could have borne it better if she could have had the satisfaction of seeing him squandering his wealth. But this solace was denied her. Mr Ravenscar had simple tastes. He kept up a large house in Grosvenor Square, to be sure, and his country estate, Chamfreys, was a noble mansion, with a deer-park, some very good shooting, and a vast acreage attached to it, but he held no magnificent house-parties there, which he might, thought his aggrieved aunt, very well have done, with his stepmother to play hostess. That would have given the second Mrs Ravenscar something better to think about than her health. The second Mrs Ravenscar's health was a subject which, while it in no way concerned her, never failed to irritate Lady Mablethorpe. Her ladyship inhabited a very pretty house in Brook Street, but would infinitely have preferred to live in Grosvenor Square, where she could have entertained on a large scale. It was thus a source of continual annoyance to her that her sister-in-law should declare that the delicate state of her nerves could not support the racket of London, and should spend the best part of her time at Bath, or Tunbridge Wells. Such parties as Max gave, therefore, were either bachelor gatherings, or of a nature which must preclude his asking his aunt to act as hostess for him. She wondered that he should care to live in solitary state in such a barrack of a house!

She wondered too, being herself a woman of gregarious tastes, that he should care so little for all the accepted pleasures of his world. You might look in vain for Mr Ravenscar at balls, ridottos, and masquerades: ten to one, he would be at a cockfight, or rubbing shoulders with prize-fighters in some vulgar tavern in Whitechapel. He was a member of a number of fashionable clubs, but rarely visited most of them. His aunt had

heard that he played a good deal at Brooks's, where the play was very deep, and she knew that his horses were the envy of his friends; but these were positively his only extravagances. While the town swarmed with Bucks and Jessamies, and even men who did not aspire to these heights of fashion would spend hours on the designing of a waistcoat, and fortunes on rings, fobs, shoebuckles, and pins, Mr Ravenscar wasted neither time nor money on anything but his boots (which were admittedly excellent), and had never been seen to wear any other ornament than the heavy gold signet ring which adorned his left hand.

He was thirty-five years of age, and it was now a considerable time since any but the most optimistic of matchmaking mothers had entertained hopes of his casting the handkerchief in her daughter's direction. There had been a time when he had been the most courted man in London; invitations had showered upon him; the most wily traps had been laid for him; but the indifference with which he regarded all eligible females (an indifference which he was never at any pains to hide), his cold reserve, and his habit of pleasing himself upon all occasions, had at last convinced the disappointed matrons that there was nothing whatever to be hoped for from him, not even some pretty, expensive trinket to mark his regard for those ladies who thought themselves his friends. Mr Ravenscar gave nothing away. No use thinking that he would gallantly offer to frank you at whist, or silver loo: he was far more likely to arise from the table further enriched by your losses. It was small consolation to reflect that ladies of easier virtue with whom his name had been coupled from time to time had never been able to flaunt jewels of his bestowing: it merely showed him to be abominably tightfisted, a shocking fault! He was held to be a proud, disagreeable man; his manners were not conciliating; and although the gentlemen said that he was a good sportsman, meticulous in all matters of play and pay, the ladies were much inclined to think him a rakish fellow, with a pronounced taste for low company.

Lady Mablethorpe, who relied upon his help, and had for years trusted his advice, condemned his rudeness, deplored his

coldness of heart, stood just a little in awe of his occasionally blistering tongue, and hoped that somebody one day would teach him a much-needed lesson. It would serve him right if he were to lose a great deal of money in St James's Square, for instance: ten thousand pounds, perhaps, which any man less odiously selfish would have offered to put up on behalf of his unfortunate young cousin.

Two

*M*r Ravenscar was spared the necessity of trading upon his name and fortune, by encountering upon the doorstep of Lady Bellingham's house in St James's Square an acquaintance who was perfectly willing to introduce him to her ladyship. Mr Berkeley Crewe prophesied that the old girl would be delighted to welcome him, assured him that the play was fair, the wine very tolerable, and the suppers the best in town; and said that Lady Bel had quite cast Mrs Sturt and Mrs Hobart into the shade. The door being opened to them by a stalwart individual with a rugged countenance and a cauliflower ear, they passed into the lofty hall, Mr Crewe nodding in a familiar manner to the porter, and saying briefly: 'Friend of mine, Wantage.'

Mr Wantage favoured the stranger with an appraising and a ruminative stare before offering to help him off with his greatcoat. Mr Ravenscar returned this with interest. 'When were you in the Ring?' he asked.

Mr Wantage seemed pleased. 'Ah, it's a long time ago now!' he said. 'Afore I joined the army, that was. Fancy you a-spotting that!'

'It wasn't difficult,' replied Ravenscar, shaking out his ruffles.

'I was thinking you'd peel to advantage yourself, sir,' observed Mr Wantage.

Mr Ravenscar smiled slightly, but returned no answer. Mr Crewe, having adjusted his satin coat to his satisfaction, given a twitch to his lace, and anxiously scrutinized his appearance in the

mirror on the wall, led the way to the staircase. Ravenscar, after glancing about him, and noting that the house was furnished in the first style of elegance, followed him up to a suite of saloons on the first floor.

Entering the gaming-rooms by the first door they came to, they found themselves in an apartment given over to deep basset. About a dozen persons were seated round a table, most of them so intent upon the cards that the entrance of the newcomers passed unnoticed. A deathly hush brooded over the room, in marked contrast to the cheerful hubbub in the adjoining saloon, towards which Mr Crewe led his friend. This was a noble apartment in the front of the house, hung with straw-coloured satin, and furnished with a number of chairs, tables, and stands for the punters' rouleaus, and their glasses. At one end of the room a faro-bank was in full swing, presided over by a somewhat raddled lady in purple satin, and a turban lavishly adorned with ostrich plumes; at the other end, nearer to the fire, a vociferous knot of persons was gathered round an E.O. table, which was being set in motion by a tall young woman with chestnut hair, glowing in the candlelight, and a pair of laughing, dark eyes set under slim, arched brows. Her luxuriant hair was quite simply dressed, without powder, being piled up on top of her head, and allowed to fall in thick, smooth curls. One of these had slipped forward, as she bent over the table, and lay against her white breast. She looked up as Mr Crewe approached her, and Mr Ravenscar, dispassionately surveying her, had no difficulty at all in understanding why his young relative had so lamentably lost his head. The lady's eyes were the most expressive and brilliant he had ever seen. Their effect upon an impressionable youth would, he thought, be most destructive. As a connoisseur of female charms, he could not but approve of the picture Miss Grantham presented. She was built on queenly lines, carried her head well, and possessed a pretty wrist, and a neatly turned ankle. She looked to have a good deal of humour, and her voice, when she spoke, was low-pitched and pleasing. On one side of her, lounging over a chairback, an exquisite in a striped coat and

a powdered wig watched the spin of the table in a negligent, detached fashion; on the other, Mr Ravenscar's cousin had no eyes for anything but Miss Grantham's face.

Miss Grantham, seeing a stranger crossing the room in Mr Crewe's wake, looked critically at him. Trained by necessity to sum up a man quickly, she was yet hard put to it to place Mr Ravenscar. His plain coat, the absence of any jewels or furbelows, did not argue a fat bank-roll, but his air was one of unconscious assurance, as though he was accustomed to going where he chose, and doing what he pleased in any company. If at first glance she had written him down as a country bumpkin, this impression was swiftly corrected. He might be carelessly dressed, but no country tailor had fashioned that plain coat, she decided.

She turned her head towards the middle-aged exquisite leaning on the chairback. 'Who is our new friend, my lord? A Puritan come amongst us?'

The exquisite languidly raised a quizzing-glass, and levelled it. Under its elaborate *maquillage* his thin, handsome face was curiously lined. His brows went up. 'That is no Puritan, my dear,' he said, in a light, bored voice. 'It is a very fat pigeon indeed. In fact, it is Ravenscar.'

This pronouncement brought young Lord Mablethorpe's head round with a jerk. He stared incredulously at his cousin, and ejaculated: 'Max!'

There was astonishment in his tone, not unmixed with suspicion. His fair countenance flushed boyishly, making him look younger than ever, and not a little guilty. He stepped forward, saying rather defensively: 'I did not expect to see you here!'

'Why not?' asked Ravenscar calmly.

'I don't know. That is, I did not think – Do you know Lady Bellingham?'

'I am relying upon Crewe to present me to her.'

'Oh! It was Crewe who brought you!' said his lordship, a little relieved. 'I thought – at least, I wondered – But it doesn't signify!'

Mr Ravenscar eyed him with a kind of bland surprise. ‘You seem to be most unaccountably put-out by my arrival, Adrian. What have I done to incur your disapproval?’

Lord Mablethorpe blushed more hotly than ever, and grasped his arm in a quick, friendly gesture. ‘Oh, Max, you fool! Of course you haven’t done anything! Indeed, I’m very glad to see you! I want to make you known to Miss Grantham. Deb! This is my cousin, Mr Ravenscar. I daresay you will have heard of him. He is a notable gamester, I can tell you!’

Miss Deborah Grantham, encountering Mr Ravenscar’s hard grey eyes, was not sure that she liked him. She acknowledged his bow with the smallest of curtseys, and said lightly: ‘You are very welcome, sir, and have certainly come to the right house. You know Lord Ormskirk, I believe?’

The middle-aged exquisite and Ravenscar exchanged nods. A large, loose-limbed man, standing on the other side of the table, said, with a twinkle: ‘Don’t be shy, Mr Ravenscar: we’re all mighty anxious to win your money! But, I warn you, Miss Grantham’s luck is in – isn’t it, me darlin’? – and the bank’s been winning this hour and more.’

‘It’s commonly the way of E.O. banks – to win,’ remarked a metallic, faintly sneering voice at Ravenscar’s elbow. ‘Servant, Ravenscar!’

Mr Ravenscar, responding to this salutation, made a mental vow to rescue his cousin from the society into which he had been lured if he had to knock him out and kidnap him to do it. The Earl of Ormskirk, Sir James Filey, and – as a comprehensive glance round the room had informed him – all the more hardened gamesters who frequented Pall Mall and its environs were no fit companions for a youth scarcely out of swaddling-bands. It would, at that moment, have given Mr Ravenscar great pleasure to have seen Miss Grantham standing in the pillory, together with her aunt, and every other *brelandière* who seduced green young men to ruin in these polite gaming-houses.

Nothing of this appeared in his face as he accepted Miss Grantham’s invitation to make his bet. E.O. tables held not the

slightest lure for him, but since he had come to St James's Square for the purpose of getting upon easy terms with Miss Grantham, and judged that the quickest way of doing this was to spend as much money as possible in her house, he spent the next half-hour punting recklessly on the spin of the table.

Meanwhile, the dowager at the faro-table, who was Lady Bellingham, had discovered his identity, and was pleasantly fluttered. One of her neighbours informed her that Ravenscar had twenty or thirty thousand pounds a year, but tempered these glad tidings by adding that he was said to have the devil's own luck at all games of chance. If this were so, it was out tonight. Mr Ravenscar went down to the tune of five hundred guineas in the short time he spent at the E.O. table. While affecting an interest he was far from feeling in the gyrations of the little ball, he had the opportunity he sought of observing Miss Grantham. He was obliged also to observe his cousin's lover-like attentions to the lady, a spectacle which made him feel physically unwell. Adrian's frank blue eyes openly adored her; he paid very little attention to anyone else; and his attitude towards Lord Ormskirk reminded Ravenscar strongly of a dog guarding a bone.

Ormskirk seemed faintly amused. Several times he addressed some provocative remark to Adrian, as though he derived a sadistic pleasure from baiting the boy. Several times Adrian seemed to be on the verge of bursting into intemperate speech, but on each such occasion Miss Grantham intervened, turning his lordship's poisoned rapier aside with considerable deftness, tossing a laughing rejoinder to him, soothing Adrian by a swift, intimate smile which seemed to assure him that between him and her there was a secret understanding which Ormskirk's sallies could not impair.

Ravenscar allowed her to be a very clever young woman, and liked her none the better for it. She was holding two very different lovers on the lightest of reins, and so far she had not tangled the ribbons. But although Adrian might be easy to handle, Ormskirk was of another kidney, reflected Ravenscar, with grim satisfaction.

His lordship, who was nearer fifty years of age than forty, had been twice married, and was again a widower. It was popularly supposed that he had driven both his wives into their graves. He had several daughters, none yet having emerged from the schoolroom, and one son, still in short coats. His household was presided over by his sister, a colourless woman, prone to tears, which perhaps accounted for the fact of his lordship's being so seldom to be found at home. Both his marriages had been prudent, if unexciting, and since he had for years been in the habit of seeking his pleasures in the arms of a succession of fair Cyprians, it was in the highest degree unlikely that he was contemplating a third venture into matrimony. If he were, he would not look for his new bride in a gaming-house, Mr Ravenscar knew. His designs on Miss Grantham were strictly dishonourable; and, judging by his cool air of ownership, he was very sure of her, too sure to be discomposed by the calf-love of a younger suitor.

But Ravenscar knew Ormskirk too well to feel easy in his mind. If Miss Grantham were to decide that marriage with Adrian would be better worth her while than a more elastic connection with Ormskirk, Adrian would have acquired a very dangerous enemy. No consideration of his youth would weigh for an instant with one whose pride it was to be considered deadly either with the small-sword, or the pistol. It was perfectly well known to Ravenscar that Ormskirk had thrice killed his man in a duel; and he began to perceive that the extrication of his cousin from Miss Grantham's toils was a matter of even greater urgency than he had at first supposed.

The third gentleman who appeared to have claims on Miss Grantham was the man who had so cheerfully hailed him upon his first approaching the table. He seemed to be on intimate terms with the lady, but was resented neither by Adrian nor by Lord Ormskirk. He was a pleasant fellow, with smiling eyes, and an engaging address. Mr Ravenscar would have been much surprised to have found that he was not a soldier of fortune. Miss Grantham called him Lucius; he called Miss Grantham his