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The butler, recognizing her ladyship's only surviving brother at a glance, as he afterwards informed his less percipient subordinates, favoured Sir Horace with a low bow, and took it upon himself to say that my lady, although not at home to less nearly-connected persons, would be happy to see him. Sir Horace, unimpressed by this condescension, handed his caped-greatcoat to one footman, his hat and cane to the other, tossed his gloves on to the marble-topped table, and said that he had no doubt of that, and how was Dassetts keeping these days? The butler, torn between gratification at having his name remembered and disapproval of Sir Horace's free and easy ways, said that he was as well as could be expected, and happy (if he might venture to say so) to see Sir Horace looking not a day older than when he had last had the pleasure of announcing him to her ladyship. He then led the way, in a very stately manner, up the imposing stairway to the Blue Saloon, where Lady Ombersley was dozing gently on a sofa by the fire, a Paisley shawl spread over her feet, and her cap decidedly askew. Mr Dassetts, observing these details, coughed, and made his announcement in commanding accents: 'Sir Horace Stanton-Lacy, my lady!'

Lady Ombersley awoke with a start, stared for an uncomprehending moment, made an ineffective clutch at her cap, and uttered a faint shriek. 'Horace!'

'Hallo, Lizzie, how are you?' said Sir Horace, walking across the room, and bestowing an invigorating buffet upon her shoulder.

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‘Good heavens, what a fright you gave me!’ exclaimed her ladyship, uncorking the vinaigrette which was never out of her reach.

The butler, having tolerantly observed these transports, closed the door upon the reunited brother and sister, and went away to disclose to his underlings that Sir Horace was a gentleman as lived much abroad, being, as he was informed, employed by the Government on Diplomatic Business too delicate for their understanding.

The diplomatist, meanwhile, warming his coat-tails by the fire, refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff and told his sister that she was putting on weight. ‘Not growing any younger, either of us,’ he added handsomely. ‘Not but what I can give you five years, Lizzie, unless my memory’s at fault, which I don’t think it is.’

There was a large gilded mirror on the wall opposite to the fireplace, and as he spoke Sir Horace allowed his gaze to rest upon his own image, not in a conceited spirit, but with critical approval. His forty-five years had treated him kindly. If his outline had thickened a little, his height, which was well above six foot, made a slight portliness negligible. He was a very fine figure of a man, and had, besides a large and well-proportioned frame, a handsome countenance, topped by luxuriant brown locks as yet unmarred by silver streaks. He was always dressed with elegance, but was by far too wise a man to adopt such extravagances of fashion as could only show up the imperfections of a middle-aged figure. ‘Take a look at poor Prinny!’ said Sir Horace to less discriminating cronies. ‘He’s a lesson to us all!’

His sister accepted the implied criticism unresentfully. Twenty-seven years of wedlock had left their mark upon her; and the dutiful presentation to her erratic and far from grateful spouse of eight pledges of her affection had long since destroyed any pretensions to beauty in her. Her health was indifferent, her disposition compliant, and she was fond of saying that when one was a grandmother it was time to be done with thinking of one’s appearance.

‘How’s Ombersley?’ asked Sir Horace, with more civility than interest.

‘He feels his gout a little, but considering everything he is remarkably well,’ she responded.

Sir Horace took a mere figure of speech in an undesirably literal spirit, saying with a nod: ‘Always did drink too much. Still, he must be going on for sixty now, and I don’t suppose you have so much of the other trouble, do you?’

‘No, no!’ said his sister hastily. Lord Ombersley’s infidelities, though mortifying when conducted, as they too often were, in the full glare of publicity, had never greatly troubled her, but she had no desire to discuss them with her outspoken relative, and gave the conversation an abrupt turn by asking where he had come from.

‘Lisbon,’ he replied, taking another pinch of snuff.

Lady Ombersley was vaguely surprised. It was now two years since the close of the long Peninsular War, and she rather thought that, when last heard of, Sir Horace had been in Vienna, no doubt taking mysterious part in the Congress, which had been so rudely interrupted by the escape of that dreadful Monster from Elba. ‘Oh!’ she said, a little blankly. ‘Of course, you have a house there! I was forgetting! And how is dear Sophia?’

‘As a matter of fact,’ said Sir Horace, shutting his snuff-box, and restoring it to his pocket, ‘it’s about Sophy that I’ve come to see you.’

Sir Horace had been a widower for fifteen years, during which period he had neither requested his sister’s help in rearing his daughter nor paid the least heed to her unsolicited advice, but at these words an uneasy feeling stole over her. She said: ‘Yes, Horace? Dear little Sophia! It must be four years or more since I saw her. How old is she now? I suppose she must be almost out?’

‘Been out for years,’ responded Sir Horace. ‘Never anything else really. She’s twenty.’

‘Twenty!’ exclaimed Lady Ombersley. She applied her mind to arithmetic, and said: ‘Yes, she must be, for my own Cecilia is

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just turned nineteen, and I remember that your Sophia was born almost a year before. Dear me, yes! Poor Marianne! What a lovely creature she was, to be sure!

With a slight effort Sir Horace conjured up the vision of his dead wife. 'Yes, so she was,' he agreed. 'One forgets, you know. Sophy's not much like her: favours me!'

'I know what a comfort she must have been to you,' sighed Lady Ombersley. 'And I'm sure, dear Horace, that nothing could be more affecting than your devotion to the child!'

'I wasn't in the least devoted,' interrupted Sir Horace. 'I shouldn't have kept her with me if she'd been troublesome. Never was: good little thing, Sophy!'

'Yes, my dear, no doubt, but to be dragging a little girl all over Spain and Portugal, when she would have been far better in a select school—'

'Not she! She'd have learnt to be missish,' said Sir Horace cynically. 'Besides, no use to prose to me now on that head: it's too late! The thing is, Lizzie, I'm in something of a fix. I want you to take care of Sophy while I'm in South America.'

'South America?' gasped Lady Ombersley.

'Brazil. I don't expect to be away very long, but I can't take my little Sophy, and I can't leave her with Tilly, because Tilly's dead. Died in Vienna, couple of years ago. A devilish inconvenient thing to do, but I daresay she didn't mean it.'

'Tilly?' said Lady Ombersley, all at sea.

'Lord, Elizabeth, don't keep on repeating everything I say! Shocking bad habit! Miss Tillingham, Sophy's governess!'

'Good heavens! Do you mean to tell me that the child has no governess now?'

'Of course she has not! She don't need a governess. I always found plenty of chaperons for her when we were in Paris, and in Lisbon it don't signify. But I can't leave her alone in England.'

'Indeed, I should think not! But, my dearest Horace, though I would do anything to oblige you, I am not quite sure—'

'Nonsense!' said Sir Horace bracingly. 'She'll be a nice

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companion for your girl – what’s her name? Cecilia? Dear little soul, you know: not an ounce of vice in her!’

This fatherly tribute made his sister blink, and utter a faint protest. Sir Horace paid no heed to it. ‘What’s more, she won’t cause you any trouble,’ he said. ‘She has her head well on her shoulders, my Sophy. I never worry about her.’

An intimate knowledge of her brother’s character made it perfectly possible for Lady Ombersley to believe this, but since she herself was blessed with much the same easy-going temperament, no acid comment even rose to her lips. ‘I am sure she must be a dear girl,’ she said. ‘But, you see, Horace –’

‘And another thing is that it’s time we were thinking of a husband for her,’ pursued Sir Horace, seating himself in a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace. ‘I knew I could depend on you. Dash it, you’re her aunt! My only sister, too.’

‘I should be only too happy to bring her out,’ said Lady Ombersley wistfully. ‘But the thing is I don’t think – I am rather afraid – You see, what with the really dreadful expense of presenting Cecilia last year, and dearest Maria’s wedding only a little time before that, and Hubert’s going up to Oxford, not to mention the fees at Eton for poor Theodore –’

‘If it’s expense that bothers you, Lizzie, you needn’t give it a thought, for I’ll stand the nonsense. You won’t have to present her at Court: I’ll attend to all that when I come home, and if you don’t want to be put to the trouble of it then I can find some other lady to do it. What I want at this present is for her to go about with her cousins, meet the right set of people – you know the style of thing!’

‘Of course I know, and as for *trouble* it would be no such thing! But I can’t help feeling that perhaps – perhaps it would not do! We do not entertain very much.’

‘Well, with a pack of girls on your hands you ought to,’ said Sir Horace bluntly.

‘But, Horace, I have not got a pack of girls on my hands!’ protested Lady Ombersley. ‘Selina is only sixteen, and Gertrude and Amabel are barely out of the nursery!’

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‘I see what it is,’ said Sir Horace indulgently. ‘You’re afraid she may take the shine out of Cecilia. No, no, my dear! My little Sophy’s no beauty. She’s well enough – in fact, I daresay you’ll think she’s a very pretty girl – but Cecilia’s something quite out of the common way. Remember thinking so when I saw her last year. I was surprised, for you were never above the average yourself, Lizzie, while I was always thought Ombersley a plain-looking fellow.’

His sister accepted these strictures meekly, but was quite distressed that he should suppose her capable of harbouring such unhandsome thoughts about her niece. ‘And even if I was so odious, there is no longer the least need for such notions,’ she added. ‘Nothing has as yet been announced, Horace, but I don’t scruple to tell you that Cecilia is about to contract a very eligible alliance.’

‘That’s good,’ said Sir Horace. ‘You’ll have leisure to look about you for a husband for Sophy. You won’t have any difficulty: she’s a taking little thing, and she’ll have a snug fortune one of these days, besides what her mother left her. No need to be afraid of her marrying to disoblige us, either: she’s a sensible girl, and she’s been about the world enough to be well up to snuff. Whom have you got for Cecilia?’

‘Lord Charlbury has asked Ombersley’s permission to address her,’ said his sister, swelling a little with pride.

‘Charlbury, eh,’ said Sir Horace. ‘Very well indeed, Elizabeth! I must say, I didn’t think you’d catch much of a prize, because looks aren’t everything, and from the way Ombersley was running through his fortune when I last saw him –’

‘Lord Charlbury,’ said Lady Ombersley a little stiffly, ‘is an extremely wealthy man, and, I know, has no such vulgar consideration in mind. Indeed, he told me himself that it was a case of love at first sight with him!’

‘Capital!’ said Sir Horace. ‘I should suppose him to have been hanging out for a wife for some time – thirty at least, ain’t he? – but if he has a veritable *tendre* for the girl, so much the better! It should fix his interest with her.’

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‘Yes,’ agreed Lady Ombersley. ‘And I am persuaded they will suit very well. He is everything that is amiable and obliging, his manners most gentleman-like, his understanding decidedly superior, and his person such as must please.’

Sir Horace, who was not much interested in his niece’s affairs, said: ‘Well, well, he is plainly a paragon, and we must allow Cecilia to think herself fortunate to be forming such a connection! I hope you may manage as prettily for Sophy!’

‘Indeed, I wish I might!’ she responded, sighing. ‘Only it is an awkward moment, because – The thing is, you see, that I am afraid Charles may not quite like it!’

Sir Horace frowned in an effort of memory. ‘I thought his name was Bernard. Why shouldn’t he like it?’

‘I am not speaking of Ombersley, Horace. You must remember Charles!’

‘If you’re talking about the eldest boy of yours, of course I remember him! But why has he to say anything, and why the devil should he object to my Sophy!’

‘Oh, no, not to her! I am sure he could not do so! But I fear he may not like it if we are to be plunged into gaiety just now! I daresay you may not have seen the announcement of his own approaching marriage, but I should tell you that he has contracted an engagement to Miss Wraxton.’

‘What, not old Brinklow’s daughter? Upon my word, Lizzie, you have been busy to some purpose! Never knew you had so much sense! Eligible, indeed! You are to be congratulated!’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Ombersley. ‘Oh, yes! Miss Wraxton is a most superior girl. I am sure she has a thousand excellent qualities. A most well-informed mind, and principles such as must command respect.’

‘She sounds to me like a dead bore,’ said Sir Horace frankly.

‘Charles,’ said Lady Ombersley, staring mournfully into the fire, ‘does not care for very lively girls, or – or for any extravagant folly. I own, I could wish Miss Wraxton had rather more *vivacity* – but you are not to regard that, Horace, for I had never the least inclination towards being a blue-stocking myself,

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and in these days, when so many young females are wild to a fault, it is gratifying to find one who – Charles thinks Miss Wraxton’s air of grave reflection very becoming!’ she ended, in rather a hurry.

‘You know, Lizzie, it’s a queer thing that any son of yours and Ombersley’s should have grown into such a dull stick,’ remarked Sir Horace dispassionately. ‘I suppose you didn’t play Ombersley false, did you?’

‘Horace!’

‘No, I know you didn’t! No need to fly into a pucker! Not with your eldest: you know better than that! Still, it *is* an odd circumstance: often thought so! He can marry his blue-stocking, and welcome, for anything I care, but none of this explains why you should be caring a fig for what he likes or don’t like!’

Lady Ombersley transferred her gaze from the glowing coals to his face. ‘You do not perfectly understand, Horace.’

‘That’s what I said!’ he retorted.

‘Yes, but – Horace, Matthew Rivenhall left his whole fortune to Charles!’

Sir Horace was generally accounted an astute man, but he appeared to find it difficult correctly to assimilate this information. He stared fixedly at his sister for a moment or two, and then said: ‘You don’t mean that old uncle of Ombersley’s?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘The Nabob?’

Lady Ombersley nodded, but her brother was still not satisfied. ‘Fellow who made a fortune in India?’

‘Yes, and we always thought – but he said Charles was the only Rivenhall other than himself who had the least grain of sense, and he left him everything, Horace! *Everything!*’

‘Good God!’

This ejaculation seemed to appear to Lady Ombersley as fitting, for she nodded again, looking at her brother in a woebegone fashion, and twisting the fringe of her shawl between her fingers.

‘So it is Charles who calls the tune!’ said Sir Horace.

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‘No one could have been more generous,’ said Lady Ombersley unhappily. ‘We cannot but be sensible of it.’

‘Damn his impudence!’ said Sir Horace, himself a father. ‘What’s he done?’

‘Well, Horace, you might not know it, because you are always abroad, but poor Ombersley had a great many debts.’

‘Everyone knows that! Never knew him when he wasn’t under a cloud! You’re not going to tell me the boy was fool enough to settle ’em?’

‘But, Horace, someone had to settle them!’ she protested. ‘You can have no notion how difficult things were becoming! And with the younger boys to establish creditably, and the dear girls – it is no wonder that Charles should be so anxious that Cecilia should make a good match!’

‘Providing for the whole pack, is he? More fool he! What about the mortgages? If the greater part of Ombersley’s inheritance had not been entailed he would have gambled the whole away long since!’

‘I do not properly understand entails,’ said his sister, ‘but I am afraid that Charles did not behave just as he should over it. Ombersley was very much displeased – though I shall always say that to call one’s first-born a serpent’s tooth is to use quite unbecoming language! It seems that when Charles came of age he might have made everything quite easy for his poor papa, if only he had been in the least degree obliging! But nothing would prevail upon him to agree to break the entail, so all was at a standstill, and one cannot blame Ombersley for being vexed! And then that odious old man died –’

‘When?’ demanded Sir Horace. ‘How comes it about that I never heard a word of this before today?’

‘It was rather more than two years ago, and –’

‘That accounts for it, then: I was devilish busy, dealing with Angoulême, and all that set. Must have happened at the time of Toulouse, I dare swear. But when I saw you last year you never spoke a word, Lizzie!’

She was stung by the injustice to this, and said indignantly: ‘I

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am sure I don't know how I should have been thinking of such paltry things, with that Monster at large, and the Champs de Mars, and the banks suspending payment, and heaven knows what beside! And you coming over from Brussels without a word of warning, and sitting with me a bare twenty minutes! My head was in a whirl, and if I answered you to the point it is more than I would have bargained for!

Sir Horace, disregarding this irrelevancy, said, with what for him was strong feeling: 'Outrageous! I don't say Ombersley's not a shocking loose-screw, because there's no sense in wrapping plain facts up in clean linen, but to be cutting a man out of one's will and setting up his son to lord it over him – which I'll be bound he does!'

'No, no!' expostulated Lady Ombersley feebly. 'Charles is fully sensible of what is due to his father! It is not that he is ever lacking in respect, I do assure you! Only poor Ombersley cannot but feel it a little, now that Charles has taken everything into his own hands.'

'A pretty state of affairs!'

'Yes, but one comfort is that it is not generally known. And I cannot deny that in some ways it is by far more pleasant. You would scarcely credit it, Horace, but I do believe there is not an unpaid bill in the house!' A moment's reflection caused her to modify this statement. 'At least, I cannot answer for Ombersley, but all those dreadful household accounts, which Eckington – you remember our good Eckington, Ombersley's agent? – used to pull such a face over; and the fees at Eton and Oxford – *everything*, my dear brother, Charles takes care of!'

'You aren't going to tell me Charles is fool enough to fritter away old Matt Rivenhall's fortune paying all the expenses of this barrack of a house!' exclaimed Sir Horace.

'No. Oh, no! I have not the least head for business, so it is of no use to ask me to explain it to you, but I believe that Charles persuaded his father to – to allow him to administer the estate.'

'Blackmailed him into it, more like!' said Sir Horace grimly.

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‘Rare times we live in! Mind, I see the boy’s point, Lizzie, but, by God, I’m sorry for you!’

‘Oh, pray believe it’s no such thing!’ cried Lady Ombersley, distressed. ‘I did not wish you to think – to give you cause to suppose that Charles is ever disagreeable, for indeed he is not, except when he is put out of temper, and one must own that he has a great deal to try his patience! Which is why I can’t but feel, dear Horace, that if he does not like me to take charge of Sophia for you, I ought not to tease him!’

‘Fiddlesticks!’ said Sir Horace. ‘And why shouldn’t he like it?’

‘We – we decided not to give any parties this season, beyond what must be thought necessary. It is a most unfortunate circumstance that Charles’s wedding has had to be postponed, on account of a bereavement Miss Wraxton has suffered. One of Lady Brinklow’s sisters, and they will not be out of black gloves for six months. You must know that the Brinklows are very particular in all matters of correct conduct. Eugenia goes only to very quiet parties, and – and naturally one must expect Charles to partake of her sentiments!’

‘Lord, Elizabeth, a man don’t have to wear black gloves for the aunt of a female he ain’t even married to!’

‘Of course not, but Charles seemed to feel – and then there is Charlbury!’

‘What the devil ails him!’

‘Mumps,’ replied Lady Ombersley tragically.

‘He?’ Sir Horace burst out laughing. ‘Well, what a fellow he must be to have mumps when he should be getting married to Cecilia!’

‘Really, Horace, I must say that I think that most unjust of you, for how could he help it? It is so mortifying for him! And, what is more, excessively unfortunate, because I don’t doubt that had he been able to attach Cecilia – which I am sure he must have done, for nothing could be more amiable than his disposition, while his manners and address are just what they ought to be! But girls are so foolish, and take romantical notions into their heads, besides all kinds of encroaching fancies – however, I

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am happy to think that Cecilia is not one of those dreadful modern misses, and of course she will be guided by her parents! But no one can deny that nothing could be more ill-timed than Charlbury's mumps!

Sir Horace, once more opening his snuff-box, regarded her with an amused and a sapient eye. 'And what is Miss Cecilia's particular encroaching fancy?' he enquired.

Lady Ombersley knew that her eldest son would have counselled her to preserve a discreet silence; but the impulse to unburden herself to her brother was too strong to be denied. She said: 'Well, you will not repeat it, I know, Horace, but the fact is that the silly child thinks she is in love with Augustus Fawnhope!'

'One of Lutterworth's boys?' asked Sir Horace. 'I don't think much of that for a match, I must say!'

'Good heavens, don't mention such a thing! The youngest son, too, with not the least expectation in the world! But he is a poet.'

'Very dangerous,' agreed Sir Horace. 'Don't think I ever saw the boy: what's he like?'

'Quite beautiful!' said Lady Ombersley, in despairing accents.

'What, in the style of Lord Byron? That fellow has a great deal to answer for!'

'No-no. I mean, he is as fair as Cecilia is herself, and he doesn't limp, and though his poems are very pretty, bound up in white vellum, they don't seem to *take* very well. I mean, not at all like Lord Byron's. It seems sadly unjust, for I believe it cost a great deal of money to have them printed, and he had to bear the whole – or, rather, Lady Lutterworth did, according to what I have heard.'

'Now I come to think of it,' said Sir Horace, 'I do know the boy. He was with Stuart, in Brussels last year. If you take my advice, you'll marry Cecilia off to Charlbury as quickly as you can!'

'Well, and so I would, if only – that is to say, of course I would not, if I thought she held him in aversion! And you must see, Horace, that it is quite out of my power to do anything of the sort when he is in bed with the mumps!'

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Sir Horace shook his head. 'She will marry the poet.'

'Do not say so! But Charles thinks that I should do wisely not to take her where she is bound to meet the young man, which is another reason why we are living in a quiet style for the present. It is of all things the most awkward! Indeed, sometimes I feel that it would be much easier if the wretched creature were quite ineligible – a fortune-hunter, or a merchant's son, or something of that nature! One could then forbid him the house, and forbid Cecilia to stand up with him at balls, only it would not be in the least necessary for we should never meet him in society. But naturally one meets the Fawnhopes everywhere! Nothing could be more provoking! And although I am sure Charles's manner towards him is most repellent, even he acknowledges the impropriety of being so repulsive to him as to offend his family. Almeria Lutterworth is one of my oldest friends!'

Sir Horace, who was already bored with the subject, yawned, and said lazily: 'I daresay there is no occasion for you to be on the fidgets. The Fawnhopes are all as poor as Church mice, and very likely Lady Lutterworth desires the match as little as you do.'

'Nothing of the sort!' she replied, quite crossly. 'She is foolish beyond permission, Horace! Whatever Augustus wants he must have! She has given me the most unmistakable hints, so that I scarcely knew where to look, much less what to say, except that Lord Charlbury had requested our leave to address Cecilia, and I believed her to be – well, not indifferent to him! It never entered my head that Augustus was so lost to all sense of propriety as to apply to Cecilia without first approaching Ombersley, yet that is precisely what he has done!'

'Oh, well!' said Sir Horace. 'If she has such a fancy for him, you had better let her take him. It's not as though she would be marrying beneath her, and if she chooses to be the wife of a penniless younger son it is quite her own affair.'

'You would not say so if it were Sophia!' said his sister.

'Sophy's not such a fool.'

'Cecilia is not a fool either,' declared Lady Ombersley,

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affronted. 'If you have seen Augustus you can not wonder at her! No one could help feeling a decided partiality for him! I own, I did myself. But Charles is quite right, as I was soon brought to acknowledge: it would not answer!'

'Ah, well, when she has her cousin to keep her company it will divert her, and very likely give her thoughts another direction,' said Sir Horace consolingly.

Lady Ombersley appeared to be much struck by this suggestion. Her face brightened; she said: 'I wonder if it might be so? She is a little shy, you must know, and does not make friends easily, and since her dear friend, Miss Friston, was married, and has gone to live in the Midlands, there is really no young female with whom she is upon terms of intimacy. Now, if we had dear Sophia to stay with us . . .' She broke off, obviously turning plans over in her mind. She was still engaged on this exercise when the door opened, and her eldest son entered the saloon.

The Honourable Charles Rivenhall was twenty-six years old, but a rather harsh-featured countenance, coupled with a manner that combined assurance with a good deal of reserve, made him give the impression of being some years older. He was a tall, powerfully-built young man, who looked as though he would have been better pleased to have been striding over his father's acres than exchanging civilities in his mother's sitting-room. He nearly always wore riding-dress in preference to the more fashionable pantaloons and Hessians; tied his cravat in the plainest of styles; would permit only a modicum of starch to stiffen his very moderate shirt-points; wholly disdained such fopperies as seals, fobs, or quizzing-glasses; and offended his tailor by insisting on having his coats cut so that he could shrug himself into them without the assistance of his valet. He had been heard to express the hope that heaven would forbid he should ever be mistaken for one of the dandy-set; but, as his friend, Mr Cyprian Wychbold, kindly pointed out to him, there was not the least need for heavenly intervention in the matter. The dandies, said Mr Wychbold with some severity, were distinguished as much for their polished address as for their exquisite apparel,

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and were in general an amiable set of men, whose polite manners and winning graces made them acceptable in any drawing-room. As Mr Rivenhall's notion of making himself agreeable in company was to treat with cold civility anyone for whom he felt no particular liking; and his graces – far from winning – included a trick of staring out of countenance those whose pretensions he deprecated, and of uttering blighting comments, which put an abrupt end to social intercourse, he stood in far greater danger (Mr Wychbold said) of being mistaken for a Yahoo.

As he shut the door behind him, his mother looked up, started slightly, and said with a nervous inflection which annoyed her brother: 'Oh! Charles! Only fancy! Your Uncle Horace!'

'So Dasset informed me,' responded Mr Rivenhall. 'How do you do, sir?'

He shook hands with his uncle, drew up a chair, and sat down, civilly engaging Sir Horace in conversation. His mother, fidgeting first with the fringe of her shawl and then with her handkerchief, presently broke in on this interchange to say: 'Charles, you remember Sophia? Your little cousin?'

Mr Rivenhall did not present the appearance of one who remembered his little cousin, but he said in his cool way: 'Certainly. I hope she is well, sir?'

'Never had a day's illness in her life, barring the measles,' said Sir Horace. 'You'll see her for yourself soon; your mother is going to take charge of her while I'm in Brazil.'

It was plain that this way of breaking the news did not recommend itself to Lady Ombersley, who at once hurried into speech. 'Well, of course it is not quite decided yet, though I am sure there is nothing I should like better than to have my dear brother's daughter to stay with me. I was thinking, too, Charles, that it would be so pleasant for Cecilia: Sophia and she are nearly the same age, you know.'

'Brazil?' said Mr Rivenhall. 'That should be very interesting, I daresay. Do you make a long stay there, sir?'

'Oh, no!' replied Sir Horace vaguely. 'Probably not. It will depend upon circumstance. I have been telling your mother that

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I shall be much in her debt if she can find an eligible husband for my Sophy. It's time she was married, and your mother seems, from what I hear, to be quite a dab in that line. I understand I have to offer you my felicitations, my boy?"

"Thank you: yes," said Mr Rivenhall, with a slight bow.

"If you should not dislike it, Charles, I own I should be very happy to have Sophia," said Lady Ombersley placatingly.

He cast her an impatient glance, and replied: "I beg you will do precisely as you wish, ma'am. I cannot conceive what business it is of mine."

"Of course I have explained to your uncle that we lead very quiet lives."

"She won't give a fig for that," said Sir Horace comfortably. "She's a good little thing: never at a loss for something to occupy herself with. Just as happy in a Spanish village as in Vienna, or Brussels."

At this, Lady Ombersley sat up with a jerk. "Do not tell me you dragged the child to Brussels last year!"

"Of course she was in Brussels! Where the devil should she have been?" replied Sir Horace testily. "You wouldn't have had me leave her in Vienna, would you? Besides, she enjoyed it. We met a great many old friends there."

"The danger!"

"Oh, pooh! Nonsense! Precious little of that with Wellington in command!"

"When, sir, may we have the pleasure of expecting my cousin?" interposed Mr Rivenhall. "We must hope that she will not find life in London too humdrum after the superior excitement of the Continent."

"Not she!" said Sir Horace. "I never knew Sophy when she wasn't always busy with some ploy or another. Give her her head! I always do, and she never comes to any harm. Don't quite know when she'll be with you. She's bound to want to see the last of me, but she'll post up to London as soon as I've sailed."

"Post up to London as soon as – Horace, surely you will bring

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her to me!’ gasped his sister, quite scandalized. ‘A girl of her age, travelling alone! I never heard of such a thing!’

‘Won’t be alone. She’ll have her maid with her – dragon of a woman, she is: journeyed all over Europe with us! – and John Potton as well.’ He caught sight of his nephew’s raised brows, and felt himself impelled to add: ‘Groom – courier – general factotum! Looked after Sophy since she was a baby.’ He drew out his watch, and consulted it. ‘Well, now that we’ve settled everything, I must be off, Lizzie. I shall rely upon you to take care of Sophy, and look about you for a match. It’s important, because – but I’ve no time to explain that now! She’ll tell you all about it, I expect.’

‘But, Horace, we have not settled everything!’ protested his sister. ‘And Ombersley will be disappointed not to see you! I hoped you would dine with us!’

‘No, I can’t do that,’ he replied. ‘I’m dining at Carlton House. You may give my respects to Ombersley: daresay I shall see him again one of these days!’

He then kissed her in a perfunctory style, bestowed another of his hearty pats upon her shoulder, and took himself off, followed by his nephew. ‘Just as if I had nothing more to wish for!’ Lady Ombersley said indignantly, when Charles came back into the room. ‘And I have not the least notion when that child is to come to me!’

‘It doesn’t signify,’ said Charles, with an indifference she found exasperating. ‘You will give orders for a room to be prepared for her, I suppose, and she may come when she pleases. It’s to be hoped Cecilia likes her, since I imagine she will be obliged to see the most of her.’

‘Poor little thing!’ sighed Lady Ombersley. ‘I declare I quite long to mother her, Charles! What a strange, lonely life she must lead!’

‘Strange certainly; hardly lonely, if she has been acting hostess for my uncle. I must suppose that she has had some older lady to live with her: a governess, or some such thing.’

‘Indeed, one would think it must have been so, but your uncle

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distinctly told me that the governess died when they were in Vienna! I do not like to say such a thing of my only brother, but really it seems as though Horace is quite unfit to have the care of a daughter!’

‘Extremely unfit,’ he said dryly. ‘I trust you will not have cause to regret your kindness, Mama.’

‘Oh, no, I am sure I shall not!’ she said. ‘Your uncle spoke of her in such a way that gave me the greatest desire to welcome her! Poor child, I fear she has not been used to having her wishes or her comfort much considered! I could almost have been angry with Horace when he would keep on telling me that she is a good little thing, and had never been a worry to him! I daresay he has never allowed anyone to be a worry to him, for a more selfish man I believe you could hardly meet! Sophia must have her poor mother’s sweet disposition: I have no doubt of her being a charming companion for Cecilia.’

‘I hope so,’ said Charles. ‘And that reminds me, Mama! I have just intercepted another of that puppy’s floral offerings to my sister. This billet was attached to it.’

Lady Ombersley took the proffered missive, and looked at it in dismay. ‘What shall I do with it?’ she asked.

‘Put it on the fire,’ he recommended.

‘Oh, no, I could not, Charles! It might be quite unexceptionable! Besides – why, it might even contain a message from his mother for me!’

‘Highly unlikely, but if you think that, you had better read it.’

‘Of course, I know it is my duty to do so,’ she agreed unhappily.

He looked rather contemptuous, but said nothing, and after a moment’s indecision she broke the seal, and spread open the single sheet. ‘Oh, dear, it is a poem!’ she announced. ‘I must say, it is very pretty! Listen, Charles! *Nymph, when thy mild cerulean gaze Upon my restless spirit casts its beam –*’

‘I thank you, I have no taste for verse!’ interrupted Mr Rivenhall harshly. ‘Put it on the fire, ma’am, and tell Cecilia she is not to be receiving letters without your sanction!’

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‘Yes, but do you think I should burn it, Charles? Only think if this were the only copy of the poem! Perhaps he wants to have it printed!’

‘He is not going to print such stuff about any sister of mine!’ said Mr Rivenhall grimly, holding out an imperative hand.

Lady Ombersley, always overborne by a stronger will, was just about to give the paper to him when a trembling voice from the doorway arrested her: ‘Mama! Do not!’

TWO

Lady Ombersley's hand dropped; Mr Rivenhall turned sharply, a frown on his brow. His sister, casting him a look of burning reproach, ran across the room to her mother, and said: 'Give it to me, Mama! What right has Charles to burn my letters?'

Lady Ombersley looked helplessly at her son, but he said nothing. Cecilia twitched the open sheet of paper from her mother's fingers, and clasped it to her palpitating bosom. This did goad Mr Rivenhall into speech. 'For God's sake, Cecilia, let us have no play-acting!' he said.

'How dare you read my letter?' she retorted.

'I did not read your letter! I gave it to Mama, and you will scarcely say that she had no right to read it!'

Her soft blue eyes swam with tears; she said in a low voice: 'It is all your fault! Mama would never – I hate you, Charles! I hate you!'

He shrugged, and turned away. Lady Ombersley said feebly: 'You should not talk so, Cecilia! You know it is quite improper in you to be receiving letters without my knowledge! I do not know what your Papa would say if he heard of it.'

'Papa!' exclaimed Cecilia scornfully. 'No! It is Charles who delights in making me unhappy!'

He glanced over his shoulder at her. 'It would be useless, I collect, to say that my earnest wish is that you should *not* be made unhappy!'

She returned no answer, but folded the letter with shaking

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hands, and bestowed it in her bosom, throwing a defiant look at him as she did so. It was met with one of contempt; Mr Rivenhall propped his shoulders against the mantelshelf, dug his hands into his breeches' pockets, and waited sardonically for what she might say next.

She dried her eyes instead, catching her breath on little sobs. She was a very lovely girl, with pale golden locks arranged in ringlets about an exquisitely shaped face, whose delicate complexion was at the moment heightened, not unbecomingly, by an angry flush. In general, her expression was one of sweet pensiveness, but the agitation of the moment had kindled a martial spark in her eyes, and she was gripping her underlip between her teeth in a way that made her look quite vicious. Her brother, cynically observing this, said that she should make a practice of losing her temper, since it improved her, lending animation to a countenance well enough in its way but a trifle insipid.

This unkind remark left Cecilia unmoved. She could hardly fail to know that she was much admired, but she was a very modest girl, quite unappreciative of her own beauty, and would much have preferred to have been fashionably dark. She sighed, released her lip, and sat down on a low chair beside her Mama's sofa, saying in a more moderate tone: 'You cannot deny, Charles, that it is your doing that Mama has taken this – this unaccountable dislike to Augustus!'

'Now, there,' said Lady Ombersley earnestly, 'you are at fault, dearest, for I do not dislike him at all! Only I cannot think him an eligible husband!'

'I don't care for that!' declared Cecilia. 'He is the only man for whom I could ever feel that degree of attachment which – in short, I beg you will abandon any notion you may have that I could ever entertain Lord Charlbury's extremely flattering proposal, for I never shall!'

Lady Ombersley uttered a distressful but incoherent protest; Mr Rivenhall said in his prosaic way: 'Yet you were not, I fancy, so much averse from Charlbury's proposal when it was first told you.'

Cecilia turned her lambent gaze upon him, and answered: 'I had not then met Augustus.'

Lady Ombersley appeared to be a good deal struck by the logic of this pronouncement, but her son was less impressionable. He said: 'Don't waste these high flights on me, I beg of you! You have been acquainted with young Fawnhope any time these nineteen years!'

'It was not the same,' said Cecilia simply.

'That,' said Lady Ombersley, in a judicial way, 'is perfectly true, Charles. I am sure he was the most ordinary little boy, and when he was up at Oxford he had the most dreadful spots, so that no one would have supposed he would have grown into such an excessively handsome young man! But the time he spent in Brussels with Sir Charles Stuart improved him out of all knowledge! I own, I never should have known him for the same man!'

'I have sometimes wondered,' retorted Mr Rivenhall, 'whether Sir Charles will ever be the same man again either! How Lady Lutterworth can have reconciled it with her conscience to have foisted upon a public man such a nincompoop to be his secretary I must leave it to herself to decide! All *we* are privileged to know is that your precious Augustus no longer fills that office! Or any other!' he added trenchantly.

'Augustus,' said Cecilia loftily, 'is a poet. He is quite unfitted for the – the humdrum business of an ambassador's secretary.'

'I do not deny it,' said Mr Rivenhall. 'He is equally unfitted to support a wife, my dear sister. Do not imagine that *I* will frank you in this folly, for I tell you now I will not! And do not delude yourself into believing that you will obtain my father's consent to this most imprudent match, for while I have anything to say you will not!'

'I know well that it is only you who have anything to say in this house!' cried Cecilia, large tear-drops welling over her eyelids. 'I hope that when you have driven me to desperation you may be satisfied!'

From the tightening of the muscles about his mouth it was to

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be seen that Mr Rivenhall was making a praise-worthy effort to keep his none too amiable temper in check. His mother glanced anxiously up at him, but the voice in which he answered Cecilia was almost alarmingly even. ‘Will you, my dear sister, have the goodness to reserve these Cheltenham tragedies for some moment when I am not within hearing? And before you carry Mama away upon the tide of all this rodomontade, may I be permitted to remind you that so far from being forced into an unwelcome marriage you expressed your willingness to listen to what you have yourself described as Lord Charlbury’s very flattering offer?’

Lady Ombersley leaned forward to take one of Cecilia’s hands in hers, and to squeeze it compassionately. ‘Well, you know, my dearest love, that is quite true!’ she said. ‘Indeed, I thought you liked him excessively! You must not imagine that Papa or I have the least notion of compelling you to marry anyone whom you hold in aversion, for I am sure that such a thing would be quite shocking! And Charles would not do so either, would you, dear Charles?’

‘No, certainly not. But neither would I consent to her marriage with any such frippery fellow as Augustus Fawnhope!’

‘Augustus,’ announced Cecelia, putting up her chin, ‘will be remembered long after you have sunk into oblivion!’

‘By his creditors? I don’t doubt it. Will that compensate you for a lifetime spent in dodging duns?’

Lady Ombersley could not repress a shudder. ‘Alas, my love, it is too true! You cannot know the mortification – but we will not speak of that!’

‘It was useless to speak to my sister of anything outside the covers of a novel from the lending-library!’ said Charles. ‘I might have supposed that she would be thankful, in the state to which this family has been reduced, to have been on the point of contracting even a respectable alliance! But no! She is offered not a respectable but a brilliant match, and she chooses to behave like any Bath Miss, swooning and languishing over a poet! A *poet!* Good God, Mama, if the specimen of his talent which you were

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so ill-advised as to read me – but I have no patience to argue further on that head! If you cannot prevail upon her to conduct herself in a manner worthy of her breeding she had better be sent down to Ombersley, to rusticate for a while, and see if that will bring her to her senses!’

With this terrible threat he strode out of the room, leaving his sister to dissolve into tears, and his mother to recruit her strength through the medium of the vinaigrette.

Between sobs Cecilia animadverted for some moments on the cruelty of fate, which had saddled her with a brother who was as heartless as he was tyrannical, and parents who were totally unable to enter into her feelings. Lady Ombersley, though sympathetic in the main, could not allow this to pass. Without taking it upon herself to answer for her husband’s sensibilities, she assured Cecilia that her own were extremely nice, making it perfectly possible for her to appreciate the anguish of a forbidden love.

‘When I was a girl, dearest, something of the same nature happened to me,’ she said, sighing. ‘He was not a poet, of course, but I fancied myself very much in love with him. But it would not do, and in the end I was married to your Papa, which was thought to be a splendid match, for in those days he had scarcely begun to run through his fortune, and –’ She broke off, realizing that these reminiscences were infelicitous. ‘In short, Cecilia, – and I should not be obliged to say this to you – persons of our order do not marry only to please themselves.’

Cecilia was silenced, and could only hang down her head, dabbing at her eyes with an already damp handkerchief. She knew herself to have been a good deal indulged through the fondness of one parent and the cheerful indifference of the other, and was well aware that in discovering her inclination before permitting Lord Charlbury to address his suit to her Lady Ombersley had shown more consideration for her than would have been approved of by the greater part of her contemporaries. Cecilia might read novels, but she knew that the spirited behaviour of her favourite heroines was not for her to

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imitate. She foresaw that she was doomed to spinsterhood; and this reflection was so melancholy that she drooped more than ever, and once more applied her handkerchief to her eyes.

‘Only think how happy your sister is!’ said Lady Ombersley, in a heartening tone. ‘I am sure nothing could be more gratifying than to see her in her own home, with her dear baby, and James so attentive and obliging, and – and everything just what one would wish! I declare I did not believe that any love-match could have turned out better – not that I mean to say that Maria is not sincerely attached to James! But she had not met him above half a dozen times when he asked Papa’s leave to speak to her, and her affections were not engaged. Naturally, she felt a strong degree of liking, or I should never – but Maria was such a good, pretty-behaved girl! She told me herself that she felt it to be her duty to accept such a respectable offer, with Papa in such difficulties, and four more of you to be provided for!’

‘Mama, I hope I am not an unnatural daughter, but I had rather be dead than married to James!’ declared Cecilia, raising her head. ‘He thinks of nothing but hunting, and when they do have company in the evening, he goes to sleep, and *snores!*’

Daunted by this disclosure, Lady Ombersley could find nothing to say for a minute to two. Cecilia blew her nose, and added: ‘And Lord Charlbury is even older than James!’

‘Yes, but we do not know that he snores, my love,’ Lady Ombersley pointed out. ‘Indeed, we may be almost certain that he does not, for his manners are so very gentleman-like!’

‘A man who would contract the mumps,’ declared Cecilia, ‘would do anything!’

Lady Ombersley saw nothing unreasonable in this pronouncement, nor was she surprised that his lordship’s unromantic behaviour had given Cecilia a distaste for him. She had herself been sadly disappointed, for she had thought him a man of sense, certainly not one to be succumbing to childish ailments at inopportune moments. She could think of nothing to say to palliate his offence, and as Cecilia had apparently no further observations to make, silence reigned uneasily for a time. Cecilia

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presently broke it, asking rather listlessly whether it was true that her uncle had been in the house that afternoon. Glad of an excuse to talk of more cheerful matters, Lady Ombersley at once told her of the treat in store for her, and had the satisfaction of seeing the cloud lift a little from her daughter's brow. It was not difficult to enlist Cecilia's sympathies on behalf of her cousin: she could scarcely envisage a more horrid fate than to be sent to stay for an indefinite period amongst relatives who were almost strangers, and warmly promised to do all that lay in her power to make Sophia feel herself at home in Berkeley Square. She could conjure up no very clear recollection of her cousin, for it had been some years since they had met; and although she had sometimes thought that to travel about Europe must be exciting, she had also suspected that it might also be extremely uncomfortable, and readily agreed with Lady Ombersley that such an unconventional existence was scarcely an ideal preparation for a London *début*. The reflection that Sophia's arrival in Berkeley Square must mean some relaxation of the almost conventual life imposed upon the family by Charles's determination to economize sent her away to change her dress for dinner, in a far happier frame of mind.

Four of the family sat down at the huge table in the dining-room that evening, his lordship having decided to gratify his wife with one of his rare appearances at his own board. He was the only unconstrained member of the party, for he had a happy disposition which made it possible for him to remain oblivious to the most blatant signs of discontent in his companions. In the same spirit he contrived with amazing ease to be cheerful under the humiliation of being little more than his son's pensioner. He had the greatest dread of being obliged to face unpleasantness, so he never allowed himself to think about unpleasant things, which answered very well, and could be supported in times of really inescapable stress by his genius for persuading himself that any disagreeable necessity forced upon him by his own folly, or his son's overriding will, was the outcome of his own choice and wise decision. While Charles continued to render him the

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