

One

There was only one occupant of the coach, a gentleman who sprawled very much at his ease, with his legs stretched out before him, and his hands dug deep in the capacious pockets of his greatcoat. While the coach rattled over the cobbled streets of the town, the light from an occasional lantern or flambeau momentarily lit the interior of the vehicle and made a diamond pin or a pair of very large shoe-buckles flash, but since the gentleman lounging in the coach wore his gold-edged hat tilted low over his eyes, his face remained in shadow.

The coach was travelling fast, too fast for safety in a London street, and it soon drew out of the town, past the turnpike, on to Hounslow Heath. A faint moonlight showed the road to the coachman on the box, but so dimly that the groom beside him, who had been restive since the carriage drew out of St James's, gasped presently, as though he could no longer keep back the words: 'Lord! you'll overturn us! It's a wicked pace!'

The only answer vouchsafed was a shrug, and a somewhat derisive laugh. The coach swayed precariously over a rough stretch of ground, and the groom, clutching the seat with both hands, said angrily: 'You're mad! D'you think the devil's on your heels, man? Doesn't he care? Or is he drunk?' The backward jerk of his head seemed to indicate that he was speaking of the man inside the coach.

'When you've been in his service a week you won't call this a wicked pace,' replied the coachman. 'When Vidal travels, he travels swift, d'ye see?'

‘He’s drunk – three parts asleep!’ the groom said.

‘Not he.’

Yet the man inside the coach might well have been asleep for all the sign of life he gave. His long body swayed easily with the lurch of the coach, his chin was sunk in the folds of his cravat, and not even the worst bumps in the road had the effect of making him so much as grasp the strap that swung beside him. His hands remained buried in his pockets, remained so even when a shot rang out and the vehicle came to a plunging standstill. But apparently he was awake, for he raised his head, yawning, and leaning it back against the cushions turned it slightly towards the off-window.

There was a good deal of commotion outside; a rough voice was raised; the coachman was cursing the groom for his tardiness in firing the heavy blunderbuss in his charge; and the horses were kicking and rearing.

Someone rode up to the door of the coach and thrust in the muzzle of a big pistol. The moonlight cast a head in silhouette, and a voice said: ‘Hand over the pretties, my hearty!’

It did not seem as though the man inside the coach moved, but a gun spoke sharply, and a stabbing point of flame flashed in the darkness. The head and shoulders at the window vanished; there was the sound of a fall, of trampling hooves, of a startled shout, and the belated explosion of the blunderbuss.

The man in the coach drew his right hand out of his pocket at last. There was an elegant silver-mounted pistol in it, still smoking. The gentleman threw it on to the seat beside him, and crushed the charred and smouldering portion of his greatcoat between very long white fingers.

The door of the coach was pulled open, and the coachman jumped up on to the hastily let-down step. The lantern he held lit up the interior, and shone full into the face of the lounging man. It was a surprisingly young face, dark and extremely handsome, the curious vividness overlaid by an expression of restless boredom.

‘Well?’ said the gentleman coldly.

‘Highwaymen, my lord. The new man being unused, so to say, to such doings, was late with the blunderbuss. There was three of them. They’ve made off – two of them, that is.’

‘Well?’ said the gentleman again.

The coachman seemed rather discomposed. ‘You’ve killed the other, my lord.’

‘Certainly,’ said the gentleman. ‘But I presume you have not opened the door to inform me of that.’

‘Well, my lord – shan’t we – do I – his brains are lying in the road, my lord. Do we leave him – like that?’

‘My good fellow, are you suggesting that I should carry a footpad’s corpse to my Lady Montacute’s drum?’

‘No, my lord,’ the coachman said hesitatingly. ‘Then – then – shall I drive on?’

‘Of course drive on,’ said the gentleman, faintly surprised.

‘Very good, my lord,’ the coachman said, and shut the door.

The groom on the box was still clasping the blunderbuss, and staring fascinated at the tumbled figure in the road. When the coachman climbed up on to the box again, and gathered the reins in his hands, he said: ‘Gawd, ain’t you going to do anything?’

‘There isn’t anything you can do for him,’ replied the other grimly.

‘His head’s almost shot off!’ shuddered the groom.

The equipage began to move forward. ‘Hold your tongue, can’t you? He’s dead, and that’s all there is to it.’

The groom licked his dry lips. ‘But don’t his lordship know?’

‘Of course he knows. He don’t make mistakes, not with the pistols.’

The groom drew a deep breath, thinking still of the dead man left to wallow in his blood. ‘How old is he?’ he blurted out presently.

‘Twenty-four all but a month or two.’

‘Twenty-four! and shoots his man and leaves the corpse as cool as you please! My Gawd!’

He did not speak again until the coach had arrived at its

destination, and then he seemed to be so lost in meditation that the coachman had to nudge him sharply. He roused himself then and jumped off the box to open the coach door. As his master stepped languidly down, he looked covertly at him, trying to see some sign of agitation in his face. There was none. His lordship sauntered up the steps to the stone porch, and passed into the lighted hall.

‘My Gawd!’ said the groom again.

Inside the house two lackeys hovered about the late-comer to take his hat and coat.

There was another gentleman in the hall, just about to go up the wide stairway to the saloon. He was good-looking in a rather florid style, with very heavily-arched brows and a roving eye. His dress proclaimed the Macaroni, for he wore a short coat decorated with frog-buttons, fine striped breeches with bunches of strings at the knee, and a waistcoat hardly reaching below the waist. The frills of his shirt front stuck out at the top, and instead of the cravat, he displayed a very full handkerchief tied in a bow under his chin. On his head he wore an amazingly tall ladder-toupet, dusted with blue hair powder, and he carried in his hand a long tasselled cane.

He turned as my lord entered, and when he saw who it was, came across the hall. ‘I hoped I was the last,’ he complained. He raised his quizzing-glass, and through it peered at the hole in his lordship’s coat. ‘My dear Vidal!’ he said, shocked. ‘My dear fellow! Ecod, my lord, your coat!’

One of the lackeys had it over his arm. My lord shook out his Dresden ruffles, but carelessly as though it mattered very little to him to be *point-de-vice*. ‘Well, Charles, what of my coat?’ he asked.

Mr Fox achieved a shudder. ‘There’s a damned hole in it, Vidal,’ he protested. He moved forward and very gingerly lifted a fold of the garment. ‘And a damned smell of powder, Vidal,’ he said. ‘You’ve been shooting someone.’

His lordship leaned against the bannister, and opened his snuff-box. ‘Some scum of a footpad only,’ he said.

Mr Fox abandoned his affectations for the moment. ‘Kill him, Dominic?’

‘Of course,’ said my lord.

Mr Fox grinned. ‘What have you done with the corpse, my boy?’

‘Done with it?’ said his lordship with a touch of impatience. ‘Nothing. What should I do with a corpse?’

Mr Fox rubbed his chin. ‘Devil take me if I know,’ he said after some thought. ‘But you can’t leave a corpse on the road, Dominic. People might see it on the way back to town. Ladies won’t like it.’

His lordship had raised a pinch of snuff to one classic nostril, but he paused before he sniffed. ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ he admitted. A gleam, possibly of amusement, stole into his eyes. He glanced at the lackey who still held his damaged greatcoat. ‘There is a corpse somewhere on the road to town. Mr Fox does not wish it there. Remove it!’

The lackey was far too well trained to display emotion, but he was a little shaken. ‘Yes, my lord,’ he said. ‘What does your lordship want done with it, if you please?’

‘I have no idea,’ said his lordship. ‘Charles, what do you want done with it?’

‘Egad, what is to be done with a corpse in the middle of Hounslow Heath?’ demanded Mr Fox. ‘I’ve a notion it should be delivered to a constable.’

‘You hear,’ said his lordship. ‘The corpse must be conveyed to town.’

‘Bow Street,’ interjected Mr Fox.

‘To Bow Street – with the compliments of Mr Fox.’

‘No, damme, I don’t take the credit for it, Dominic. Compliments of the Marquis of Vidal, my man.’

The lackey swallowed something in his throat, and said with a palpable effort: ‘It shall be attended to, sir.’

Mr Fox looked at the Marquis. ‘I don’t see what else we can do, Dominic, do you?’

‘We seem to have been put to a vast deal of inconvenience

already,' replied the Marquis, dusting his sleeve with a very fine handkerchief. 'I do not propose to bother my head further in the matter.'

'Then we may as well go upstairs,' said Mr Fox.

'I await your pleasure, my dear Charles,' returned his lordship, and began leisurely to mount the shallow stairs.

Mr Fox fell in beside him, drawing an elegant brisé fan from his pocket. He opened it carefully, and held it for his friend to see. 'Vernis Martin,' he said.

His lordship glanced casually down at it. 'Very pretty,' he replied. 'Chassereau, I suppose.'

'Quite right,' Mr Fox said, waving it gently to and fro. 'Subject, Télémaque, in ivory.'

They passed round the bend in the stairway. Down in the hall the two lackeys looked at one another. 'Corpses one moment, fans the next,' said the man who held Vidal's coat. 'There's the Quality for you!'

The episode of the corpse had by this time apparently faded from Lord Vidal's mind, but Mr Fox, thinking it a very good tale, spoke of it to at least three people, who repeated it to others. It came in due course to the ears of Lady Fanny Marling, who, in company with her son John, and her daughter Juliana, was present at the drum.

Lady Fanny had been a widow for a number of years, and the polite world had ceased to predict a second marriage for her. Flighty she had always been, but her affection for the late Mr Edward Marling had been a very real thing. Her period of mourning had lasted a full year, and when she reappeared in society it was quite a long time before she had spirits to amuse herself with even the mildest flirtation. Now, with a daughter of marriageable age, she was becoming quite matronly, and had taken to arraying herself in purples and greys, and to wearing on her exceedingly elaborate coiffure turbans that spoke the dowager.

She was talking to an old friend, one Hugh Davenant, when she overheard the story of her nephew's latest exploit, and she at

once broke off her own conversation to exclaim: 'That abominable boy! I vow and declare I never go anywhere but what I hear of him. And never any good, Hugh. Never!'

Hugh Davenant's grey eyes travelled across the room to where the Marquis was standing, and dwelled rather thoughtfully on that arrogant figure. He did not say anything for a moment, and Lady Fanny rattled on.

'I am sure I have not the least objection to him shooting a highwayman – my dear Hugh, do but look at that odd gown! What a figure of fun – oh, it is Lady Mary Coke! Well, small wonder. She never could dress, and really she is become so strange of late, people say she is growing absolutely *English*. Yes, Hugh, I heard it from Mr Walpole, and he vowed she was mad – what was I saying? Vidal! Oh, yes, well, if he must shoot highwaymen, it's very well, but to leave the poor man dead on the road – though I make no doubt he would have done the same to Vidal, for I believe they are horridly callous, these fellows – but that's neither here nor there. Vidal had no right to leave him. Now people will say that he is wickedly blood-thirsty, or something disagreeable, and it is quite true, only one does not want the whole world to say so.' She drew a long breath. 'And Léonie,' she said – 'and you know, Hugh, I am very fond of dear Léonie – Léonie will laugh, and say that her *méchant Dominique* is dreadfully thoughtless. Thoughtless!'

Davenant smiled. 'I make no doubt she will,' he agreed. 'I sometimes think that the Duchess of Avon will always remain, at heart – Léon, a page.'

'Hugh, do I beseech you, have a care! You do not know who may overhear you. As for Avon, I truly think he does not care at all what happens to Dominic.'

'After all,' Hugh said slowly, 'Dominic is so very like him.'

Lady Fanny shut her fan with a snap. 'If you are minded to be unkind about my poor Avon, Hugh, I warn you I shall not listen. Lud, I'm sure he has been a perfect paragon ever since he married Léonie. I know he is monstrous disagreeable, and no one was ever more provoking, unless it be Rupert, who, by the

way, encourages Dominic in every sort of excess, just as one would expect – but I'll stake my reputation Avon was never such a – yes, Hugh, such a *devil* as Vidal. Why, they call him Devil's Cub! And if you are going to tell me that is because he is Avon's son, all I can say is that you are in a very teasing mood, and it's no such thing.'

'He is very young, Fanny,' Hugh said, still watching the Marquis across the room.

'That makes it worse,' declared her ladyship. 'Oh, my dear Lady Dawlish, I wondered whether I should see you to-night! I protest, it's an age since I had a talk with you . . . Odious woman, and as for her daughter, you may say what you choose, Hugh, but the girl *squints*! Where was I? Oh, Vidal, of course! Young? Yes, Hugh, I marvel that you should find that an excuse for him. The poor Hollands had trouble enough with their son, not but what I consider Holland was entirely to blame – but I never heard that Charles Fox ever did anything worse than lose a fortune at gaming, which is a thing no one could blame in him. It is very different with Vidal. From the day he left Eton he has been outrageous, and I make no doubt he was so in the nursery. It is not only his duels, Hugh – my dear, do you know he is considered positively deadly with the pistols? John tells me they say in the clubs that it makes no odds to the Devil's Cub whether he is drunk or sober, he can still pick out a playing card on the wall. He did that at White's once, and there was the most horrid scandal, for of course he was in his cups, and only fancy, Hugh, how angry all the people like old Queensberry and Mr Walpole must have been! I wish I had seen it!'

'I did see it,' said Hugh. 'A silly boy's trick, no more.'

'I dare say, but it was no boy's trick to kill young Ffolliot. A pretty to-do there was over that. But as I say, it is not only his duels. He plays high – well, so do we all, and he is a true Alastair – and he drinks too much. No one ever saw Avon in his cups that I ever heard of, Hugh. And worse – worse than all –' she stopped and made a gesture with her fan. 'Opera dancers,' she said darkly.

Davenant smiled. 'Well, Fanny, I deplore it as much as you do, but I believe you cannot say that no one ever saw Avon —'

He was interrupted. 'I am very fond of Justin,' said Lady Fanny tartly, 'but I never pretended to approve of his conduct. And with all his faults Justin was ever *bon ton*. It is no such thing with Vidal. If he were my son, I should never have consented to let him live anywhere but under my roof. My own dear John scarce leaves my side.'

Hugh bowed. 'I know you are very fortunate in your son, Fanny,' he said.

She sighed. 'Indeed, he is prodigiously like his poor papa.'

Hugh made no reply to this but merely bowed again. Knowing her ladyship as he did, he was perfectly well aware that her son's staid disposition was something of a disappointment to her.

'I am sure,' said Lady Fanny, with a touch of defiance, 'that if I heard of my John holding — holding orgies with all the wildest young rakes in town I should die of mortification.' He frowned. 'Orgies, Fanny?'

'Orgies, Hugh. Pray do not ask more.'

Davenant had heard a good many stories concerning the doings of Vidal's particular set, and bearing in mind what these stories were, he was somewhat surprised that they should have come to Lady Fanny's ears. From her expression of outraged virtue he inferred that she really had heard some of the worst tales. He wondered whether John Marling had been her informant, and reflected that in spite of his excesses one could not but like the Marquis better than his impeccable cousin.

At that moment Mr John Marling came across the room towards his mother. He was a good-looking young man of rather stocky build, dressed very neatly in Spanish-brown velvet. He was in his thirtieth year, but the staidness of his demeanour made him appear older. He greeted Davenant with a bow and a grave smile, and had begun to inquire politely after the older man's health, when his mother interrupted him.

'Pray, John, where is your sister? I was put out to see that

young Comyn present here to-night. I do trust you have not let her slip off with him?’

‘No,’ John said. ‘She is with Vidal.’

‘Oh!’ A curiously thoughtful expression came into her ladyship’s face. ‘Well, I make no doubt they were glad to see each other.’

‘I don’t know,’ John said painstakingly. ‘Juliana cried out: “Why, my dear Dominic, you here?” or some such thing, and Vidal said: “Good God! Have I stumbled on a family gathering?”’

‘That is just his way,’ Lady Fanny assured him. She turned her limpid gaze upon Davenant. ‘Vidal has a great kindness for his cousin, you know, Hugh.’

Davenant did not know it, but he was perfectly well aware of Lady Fanny’s ambition. Whatever might be the imperfections of Vidal’s character, he was one of the biggest prizes of the matrimonial market, and for years her ladyship had cherished hopes which she fondly believed to be secret.

John seemed disposed to argue the matter. ‘For my part I do not believe that Vidal cares a fig for Juliana,’ he said. ‘And as for her, I very much fear this Frederick Comyn has taken her fancy to an alarming degree.’

‘How can you be so teasing, John?’ Fanny demanded petulantly. ‘You know very well she is nothing but a child, and I am sure no thought of – of marriage, or love, or any such folly has entered her head. And if it had, it is no great matter, and when she has been in Paris a week, she will have forgotten the young man’s very existence.’

‘Paris?’ said Hugh, foreseeing that John was going to try and convince his mother for her own good. ‘Is Juliana going to Paris?’

‘Why yes, Hugh. Have you forgotten that my dear mamma was a Frenchwoman? I am sure it is no matter for wonder that the child should visit her French relatives. They are quite wild to know her, so John is to take her next week. I don’t doubt they will make so much rout with her she will hardly wish to come home again.’

‘But I do not feel at all hopeful that it will answer the purpose,’ said John heavily.

‘Pray, John, do not be so provoking!’ implored Lady Fanny, somewhat tartly. ‘You make it sound as though I were one of those odious scheming females whom I detest.’

Hugh thought it time to withdraw, and tactfully did so, leaving mother and son to argue in comfort.

Meanwhile, Miss Juliana Marling, a charming blonde dressed in blue lustring with spangled shoes, and her curls arranged *à la Gorgonne*, had dragged her cousin into one of the adjoining saloons. ‘You are the very person I wished to see!’ she informed him.

The Marquis said with conspicuous lack of gallantry: ‘If you want me to do something for you, Juliana, I warn you I never do anything for anybody.’

Miss Marling opened her blue eyes very wide. ‘Not even for me, Dominic?’ she said soulfully.

His lordship remained unmoved. ‘No,’ he replied.

Miss Marling sighed and shook her head. ‘You are horridly disobliging, you know. It quite decides me not to marry you.’

‘I hoped it might,’ said his lordship calmly.

Miss Marling made an effort to look affronted, but only succeeded in giggling. ‘You needn’t be afraid. I am going to marry someone quite different,’ she said.

His lordship evinced signs of faint interest at that. ‘Are you?’ he inquired. ‘Does my aunt know?’

‘You may be very wicked, and quite hatefully rude,’ said Miss Marling, ‘but I will say one thing for you, Dominic: you do not need to have things explained to you like John. Mamma does not mean me to marry him, and that is why I am to be packed off to France next week.’

‘Who is “he”?’ Ought I to know?’ inquired the Marquis.

‘I don’t suppose you know him. He is not at all the sort of person who would know your set,’ said Miss Marling severely.

‘Ah, then I was right,’ retorted my lord. ‘You are contemplating a *mésalliance*.’

Miss Marling stiffened in every line of her small figure. ‘It’s no such thing! He may not be a brilliant match, or have a title, but

all the men I have met who are brilliant matches are just like you, and would make the most horrid husbands.'

'You may as well let me know the worst,' said my lord. 'If you think it would annoy Aunt Fanny, I'll do what I can for you.'

She clasped both hands on his arm. 'Dear, dear Dominic! I knew you would! It is Frederick Comyn.'

'And who,' said the Marquis, 'might he be?'

'He comes from Gloucestershire – or is it Somerset? Well, it doesn't signify – and his papa is Sir Malcolm Comyn, and it is all perfectly respectable, as dear Aunt Léonie would say, for they have always lived there, and there is an estate, though not very large, I believe, and Frederick is the eldest son, and he was at Cambridge, and this is his first stay in town, and Lord Carlisle is his sponsor, so you see it is not a *mésalliance* at all.'

'I don't,' said his lordship. 'You may as well give up the notion, my dear. They'll never let you throw yourself away on this nobody.'

'Dominic,' said Miss Marling with dangerous quiet.

My lord looked lazily down at her.

'I just want you to know that my mind is made up,' she said, giving him back look for look. 'So that it is no use to talk to me like that.'

'Very well,' said my lord.

'And you will make a push to help us, won't you, dearest Dominic?'

'Oh certainly, child. I will tell Aunt Fanny that the alliance has my full approval.'

'You are quite abominable,' said his cousin. 'I know you dislike of all things to bestir yourself, but recollect, my lord, if once I am wed you need not be afraid any more that mamma will make you marry me.'

'I am not in the least afraid of that,' replied his lordship.

'I declare it would serve you right if I did marry you!' cried Miss Marling indignantly. 'You are being quite atrocious and all I want you to do is to write a letter to Tante Elisabeth in Paris!'

His lordship's attention seemed to have wandered, but at this

he brought his gaze back from the contemplation of a ripe blonde who was trying to appear unconscious of his scrutiny, and looked down into Miss Marling's face.

'Why?' he asked.

'It's perfectly plain, Dominic, I should have thought. Tante Elisabeth so dotes on you she will do whatever you wish, and if you were to solicit her kindness for a friend of yours about to make his *début* in Paris —'

'Oh, that's it, is it?' said the Marquis. 'Much good will a letter from me avail you if my respected Aunt Fanny has already warned Tante against your nobody.'

'She won't do that,' Miss Marling replied confidently. 'And he is not a nobody. She has no notion, you see, that Frederick means to follow me to Paris. So you will write, will you not, Dominic?'

'No, certainly not,' said my lord. 'I've never set eyes on the fellow.'

'I knew you would say something disagreeable like that,' said Miss Marling, unperturbed. 'So I told Frederick to be ready.' She turned her head and made a gesture with her fan, rather in the manner of a sorceress about to conjure up visions. In response to the signal a young man who had been watching her anxiously disengaged himself from a knot of persons near the door, and came towards her.

He was not so tall as Vidal, and of a very different *ton*. From his moderate-sized pigeon's-wing wig to his low-heeled black shoes, there did not seem to be a hair or a pin out of place. His dress was in the mode, but not designed to attract attention. He wore Lunardi lace at his throat and wrists, and a black solitaire adorned his cravat. Such usual adjuncts to a gentleman's costume as quizzing-glass, fobs, and watches, he had altogether dispensed with, but he had a snuff-box in one hand, and wore a cameo-ring on one finger.

The Marquis watched his approach through his quizzing-glass. 'Lord!' he said. 'What's the matter with you, Ju?'

Miss Marling chose to ignore this. She sprang up as Mr

Comyn reached them, and laid her hand on his arm. ‘Frederick, I have told my cousin all!’ she said dramatically. ‘This is my cousin, by the way. I dare say you know of him. He is very wicked and kills people in duels. Vidal, this is Frederick.’

His lordship had risen. ‘You talk too much, Juliana,’ he drawled. His dark eyes held a distinct menace, but his cousin remained unabashed. He exchanged bows with Mr Comyn. ‘Sir, your most obedient.’

Mr Comyn, who had blushed at his Juliana’s introduction, said that he was honoured.

‘Vidal is going to write to my French aunt about you,’ stated Miss Marling blithely. ‘She is really the only person in the family who is not shocked by him. Except me, of course.’

The Marquis caught her eye once more. Knowing that dangerous look of old, Miss Marling capitulated. ‘I won’t say another word,’ she promised. ‘And you will write, will you not, dear Dominic?’

Mr Comyn said in his grave young voice: ‘I think my Lord Vidal must require to know any credentials. My lord, though I am aware that I must sound like a mere adventurer, I can assure you it is no such thing. My family is well known in the West of England, and my Lord Carlisle will speak for me at need.’

‘Good God, sir! I’m not the girl’s guardian!’ said his lordship. ‘You had better address all this to her brother.’

Mr Comyn and Miss Marling exchanged rueful glances.

‘Mr Marling and Lady Fanny can hardly be unaware of my estate, sir, but – but in short I cannot flatter myself that they look upon my suit with any favour.’

‘Of course they don’t,’ agreed the Marquis. ‘You’ll have to elope with her.’

Mr Comyn looked extremely taken aback. ‘Elope, my lord!’ he said.

‘Or give the chit up,’ replied his lordship.

‘My lord,’ said Mr Comyn earnestly, ‘I ask you to believe that in journeying to Paris, I have no such impropriety in mind. It was always my father’s intention that I should visit France. Miss

Marling's going there but puts my own journey forward.'

'Yes,' said Juliana thoughtfully, 'but for all that I'm not sure it wouldn't be a very good thing to do, Frederick. I must say, Vidal, you do take some prodigious clever notions into your head! I wonder I did not think of it myself.'

Mr Comyn regarded her with a hint of sternness in his frank gaze. 'Juliana – madam! You could not suppose that I would steal you away clandestinely? His lordship was jesting.'

'Oh no, indeed he wasn't. It is just the kind of thing he would do himself. It is no good being proper and respectable, Frederick; we may be forced to elope in the end. Unless –' She paused, and looked doubtfully up at Vidal. 'You don't suppose, do you, Dominic, that my Uncle Justin could be induced to speak for us to mamma?'

My lord answered this without hesitation. 'Don't be a fool, Ju.'

She sighed. 'No, I was afraid he would not. It is a vast pity, for mamma always does what Uncle Justin says.' She caught sight of a stocky figure at the far end of the room. 'There's John! You had best go away, Frederick, for it will not do at all for John to see you talking to my cousin.'

She watched him bow, and retreat, and turned enthusiastically to the Marquis. 'Is he not a delightful creature, Vidal?' she demanded.

My lord looked at her frowningly. 'Juliana,' he said, 'do I understand that you prefer him as a husband to myself?'

'Infinitely,' Miss Marling assured him.

'You have very bad taste, my girl,' said my lord calmly.

'Indeed, cousin! And may I ask whether you prefer that yellow-haired chit I saw you with at Vauxhall as a wife to me?' retorted Juliana.

'Ill-judged, my dear. I do not contemplate marriage either with her or you. Nor am I at all certain which yellow-haired chit you mean.'

Miss Marling prepared to depart. She swept a dignified curtsey, and said: 'I do not mix with the company you keep, dear cousin, so I cannot tell you her name.'

The Marquis bowed gracefully. 'I still live, dear Juliana.'
'You are shameless and provoking,' Miss Marling said crossly
and left him.

Two

In the sunny withdrawing-room which overlooked the street sat the Duchess of Avon, listening to her sister-in-law, Lady Fanny Marling, who had called to pay her a morning visit, and to talk over the week's doings over a cup of chocolate and little sweet biscuits.

Lady Fanny no longer looked her best in the crude light of day, but her grace, though turned forty now, still retained a youthful bloom in her cheeks, and had no need at all to shrink from the sunlight. Lady Fanny, who had taken care to seat herself with her back to the window, could not help feeling slightly resentful. There really seemed to be so little difference between her grace, and the boy-girl whom Avon had brought to England twenty-four years ago. Léonie's figure was as slim as ever, her Titian hair, worn just now *en négligé*, was untouched by grey, and her eyes, those great dark-blue eyes which had first attracted the Duke, held all their old sparkle. Twenty-four years of marriage had given her dignity – when she chose to assume it, and much feminine wisdom, which she had lacked in the old days, but no wifely or motherly responsibility, no weight of honours, of social eminence had succeeded in subduing the *gamin* spirit in her. Lady Fanny considered her far too impulsive, but since she was, at the bottom of her somewhat shallow heart, very fond of her sister-in-law, she admitted that Léonie's impetuosity only added to her charm.

To-day, however, she was in no mood to admire the Duchess. Life was proving itself a tiresome business, full of unpaid bills,

and undutiful daughters. Vaguely it annoyed her that Léonie (who had a thoroughly unsatisfactory son if only she could be brought to realise it) should look so carefree.

‘I vow,’ she said rather sharply, ‘I do not know why we poor creatures slave and fret our lives out for our children, for they are all ungrateful and provoking and only want to disgrace one.’

Léonie wrinkled her brow at that. ‘I do not think,’ she said seriously, ‘that John would ever want to disgrace you, Fanny.’

‘Oh, I was not talking of John!’ said her ladyship. ‘Sons are another matter, though to be sure I should not say so to you, for you have trouble enough with poor dear Dominic, and indeed I wonder how it is he has not turned your hair white with worry already, and young as he is.’

‘I do not have trouble with Dominique,’ said Léonie flatly. ‘I find him *fort amusant*.’

‘Then I trust you will find his latest exploit *fort amusant*,’ said Lady Fanny tartly. ‘I will make no doubt he will break his neck over it, for what must he do at the drum last night but wager young Crossly – as mad a rake as ever I set eyes on, and I should be prodigious sorry to see my son in his company – that he would drive his curricule from London to Newmarket in four hours. Five hundred guineas on it, so I heard – play or pay!’

‘He drives very well,’ Léonie said hopefully. ‘I do not think that he will break his neck, but you are quite right, *tout même*, Fanny: it makes one very anxious.’

‘And not content with making absurd wagers, which of course he must lose –’

‘He will not lose,’ cried her grace indignantly. ‘And if you like I will lay you a wager that he will win!’

‘Lord, my dear, I don’t know what you would have me stake,’ said Lady Fanny, forgetting the main issue for the moment. ‘It’s very well for you with all the pin money and the jewels Avon gives you, but I give you my word I expect to find myself at any moment in that horrid place Rupert used to be clapped up in. If you can believe it I’ve not won once at loo this past month or at

silver-pharaoh, and as for whist, I vow and declare to you I wish the game had never been thought of. But that's neither here nor there, and at least I have not to stand by and watch my only son make himself the talk of the town with his bets and his highwaymen, and I don't know what more beside.'

Léonie looked interested at this. 'But tell!' she commanded. 'What highwayman?'

'Oh, it was nothing but just to match the rest of his conduct. He shot one last night on Hounslow Heath, and must needs leave the body upon the road.'

'He is a very good shot,' Léonie said. 'For me, I like best to fight with swords, and so does Monseigneur, but Dominique chooses pistols.'

Lady Fanny almost stamped her feet. 'I declare you are as incorrigible as that worthless boy himself!' she cried. 'It's very well for the world to call Dominic Devil's Cub, and place all his wildness at poor Avon's door, but for my part I find him very like his mamma.'

Léonie was delighted. '*Voyons*, that pleases me very much!' she said. 'Do you really think so?'

What Fanny might have been goaded to reply to this was checked by the quiet opening of the door behind her. She had no need to turn her head to see who had come in, for Léonie's face told her.

A soft voice spoke. 'Ah, my dear Fanny,' it said, 'lamenting my son's wickedness as usual, I perceive.'

'Monseigneur, Dominique has shot a highwayman!' Léonie said, before Fanny had time to speak.

His Grace of Avon came slowly to the fire, and stretched one thin white hand to the blaze. He carried an ebony stick, but it was noticeable that he leaned on it but slightly. He was still very upright, and only his lined face showed his age. He wore a suit of black velvet with silver lacing, and his wig, which was curled in the latest French fashion, was thickly powdered. His eyes held all their old mockery, and mockery sounded in his voice as he answered: 'Very proper.'

‘And left the body to rot on the road!’ snapped Lady Fanny. His grace’s delicate brows rose. ‘I appreciate your indignation, my dear. An untidy ending.’

‘But not at all, Monseigneur!’ Léonie said practically. ‘I do not see that a corpse is of any use at all.’

‘La, child, will you never lose those callous notions of yours?’ demanded Fanny. ‘It might be Vidal himself speaking! All he would say was that he could not bring a corpse to the drum. Yes, Avon; that is positively the only excuse he gave for his inhuman conduct.’

‘I did not know that Vidal had so much proper feeling,’ remarked his grace. He moved towards a chair and sat down. ‘Doubtless you had some other reason for visiting us to-day – other than to mourn Vidal’s exploits.’

‘Of course, I might have known you would uphold him, just to be disagreeable,’ said Lady Fanny crossly.

‘I never uphold Vidal – even to be disagreeable,’ replied his grace.

‘Indeed, and I cannot conceive how you should. I was only saying to Léonie when you came in that I have never seen my son in such scrapes as he is always in. I do not believe John has ever caused me one moment’s anxiety in all his life.’

The Duke opened his snuff-box – a plain gold case delicately painted *en grisaille* by Degault and protected by *cristal de roche*. ‘I can do nothing about it, my dear Fanny,’ he said. ‘Recollect that you wanted to marry Edward.’

Under her rouge additional and quite natural colour rose in Fanny’s cheeks. ‘I won’t hear one word against my sainted Edward!’ she said, her voice quivering a little. ‘And if you mean that John is like his dear father, I am sure I am thankful for it.’

Léonie interposed hurriedly. ‘Monseigneur did not mean anything like that, did you, Monseigneur? And me, I was always very fond of Edward. And certainly John is like him, which is a good thing, just as Juliana is very like you, only not, I think, as pretty as you were.’

‘Oh my dear, do you say so indeed?’ Lady Fanny’s angry flush

died down. 'You flatter me, but I believe I was accounted something of a beauty in my young days, was I not, Justin? Only I hope I was never so headstrong as Juliana, who is likely to ruin everything by her stupid behaviour.' She turned to Avon. 'Justin, it is too provoking! The childish chit has taken a fancy to the veriest nobody, and I am forced – yes, forced to pack her off to France till she has got over it.'

Léonie at once pricked up her ears. 'Oh, is Juliana in love? But who is he?'

'Pray do not put such an idea into her head!' besought Lady Fanny. 'It's no such matter, I'll be bound. Lord, if I had married the first man whom I fancied I loved –! It's nothing but a silly girl's first affair, but she is such a headstrong child I vow I do not know what she will be at next. So off she goes to France. John is to take her.'

'Who,' inquired his grace languidly, 'is the nobody?'

'Oh, no one of account, my dear Justin. Some country squire's son whom young Carlisle is sponsoring.'

'Is he nice?' Léonie asked.

'I dare say, my love, but that's nothing to the point. I have other plans for Juliana.' She gave her laces a little shake, and went on airily: 'I am sure we have spoken of it often enough, you and I, and I cannot help feeling that it would be a charming match, besides fulfilling my dearest wish. And I have always thought them remarkably well suited, and I make no doubt at all that everything would have been on the road to being settled by now had Juliana not taken it into her head to flout me in this way, though to be sure, I do not in the least blame her for appearing cold to him, for it is no more than he deserves.'

She paused for breath, and shot a look at Avon out of the corners of her eyes. He was quite unperturbed; a faint smile hovered over his thin lips, and he regarded his sister with an air of cynical amusement. 'I find your conversation somewhat difficult to follow, my dear Fanny,' he said. 'Pray enlighten me.'

Lady Fanny said shrewdly: 'Indeed, and I think you follow me very well, Justin.'

‘But I don’t,’ Léonie said. ‘Who deserves that Juliana should be cold? It is not the poor nobody?’

‘Of course not!’ replied her ladyship impatiently. She seemed strangely loth to explain herself. Léonie glanced inquiringly at the Duke.

He had opened his snuff-box again, and held a pinch to one nostril before he spoke. ‘I apprehend, my love, that Fanny is referring to your son.’

A blank look came into Léonie’s face. ‘Dominique? But —’ She stopped and looked at Fanny. ‘No,’ she said flatly.

Lady Fanny was hardly prepared for anything so downright. ‘Lord, my dear, what can you mean?’

‘I do not at all want Dominique to marry Juliana,’ Léonie explained.

‘Perhaps,’ said Lady Fanny, sitting very erect in her chair, ‘you will be good enough to explain what that signifies.’

‘I am sorry if I seemed rude,’ Léonie apologised. ‘Did I, Monseigneur?’

‘Very,’ he answered, shutting his snuff-box with an expert flick of the finger. ‘But, unlike Fanny, beautifully frank.’

‘Well, I am sorry,’ she repeated. ‘It is not that I do not like Juliana, but I do not think it would amuse Dominic to marry her.’

‘Amuse him!’ Fanny turned with pardonable exasperation to her brother. ‘If that is all —! Have you also forgotten the plans we made, Avon, years back?’

‘Acquit me, Fanny. I never make plans.’

Léonie interrupted a heated rejoinder to say: ‘It is true, Fanny: we did say Dominique should marry Juliana. Not Monseigneur, but you and I. But they were babies, and me, I think it is all quite different now.’

‘What is different, pray?’ demanded her ladyship.

Léonie reflected. ‘Well, Dominique is,’ she replied naïvely. ‘He is not enough respectable for Juliana.’

‘Lord, child, do you look to see him bring home one of his opera dancers on his arm?’ Lady Fanny said with a shrill little laugh.

From a doorway a cool, faintly insolent voice spoke. ‘My good aunt interests herself in my affairs, I infer.’ The Marquis of Vidal came into the room, his chapeau-bras under his arm, the wings of his riding coat clipped back, French fashion, and top boots on his feet. There was a sparkle in his eyes, but he bowed with great politeness to his aunt, and went towards the Duchess.

She flew out of her chair. ‘Ah, my little one! *Voyons*, this makes me very happy!’

He put his arms around her. The red light went out of his eyes, and a softer look transformed his face. ‘“My dear and only love,” I give you good morrow,’ he said. He shot a glance of mockery at his aunt, and took both Léonie’s hands in his. ‘“My dear – and – only – love,”’ he repeated maliciously, and kissed her fingers.

The Duchess gave a little crow of laughter. ‘Truly?’ she inquired.

Fanny saw him smile into her eyes, a smile he kept for her alone. ‘Oh, quite, my dear!’ he said negligently. Upon which my lady arose with an angry flounce of her armazine skirts, and announced that it was time she took her leave of them.

Léonie pressed her son’s hand coaxingly. ‘Dominique, you will escort your aunt to her carriage, will you not?’

‘With the greatest pleasure on earth, madam,’ he replied with promptitude, and offered his arm to the outraged lady.

She made her adieux stiffly, and went out with him. Half-way down the stairs her air of offended dignity deserted her. To be sure the boy was so very handsome, and she had ever a soft corner for a rake. She stole a glance at his profile, and suddenly laughed. ‘I declare you’re as disdainful as Avon,’ she remarked. ‘But you need not be so cross, even if I do interest myself in your affairs.’ She tapped his arm with her gloved hand. ‘You know, Dominic, I have a great fondness for you.’

The Marquis looked down at her rather enigmatically. ‘I shall strive to deserve your regard, ma’am,’ he said.

‘Shall you, my dear?’ Lady Fanny’s tone was dry. ‘I wonder! Well, there’s no use denying I had hoped you would have made me happy, you and Juliana.’

‘Console yourself, dear aunt, with the reflection that I shall cause neither you nor Juliana unhappiness.’

‘Why, what do you mean?’ she asked.

He laughed. ‘I should make a devil of a husband, aunt.’

‘I believe you would,’ she said slowly. ‘But – well, never mind.’ They had come to the big door that gave on to the street. The porter swung it open and stood waiting. Lady Fanny gave her hand to the Marquis, who kissed it punctiliously. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘A devil of a husband. I am sorry for your wife – or I should be if I were a man.’ On which obscure utterance she departed.

His lordship went back to the sunny room upstairs.

‘I hope you did not enrage her, *mon petit?*’ Léonie said anxiously.

‘Far from it,’ replied the Marquis. ‘I think – but she became profound so that I cannot be sure – that she is now glad I am not going to marry my cousin.’

‘I told her you would not. I knew you would not like it at all,’ Léonie said.

His grace surveyed her blandly. ‘You put yourself to unnecessary trouble, my love. I cannot conceive that Juliana, who seems to me to have more sense than one would expect to find in a child of Fanny’s, would contemplate marriage with Vidal.’

The Marquis grinned. ‘As usual, sir, you are right.’

‘But I do not think so at all,’ objected Léonie. ‘And if you are right, then I say that Juliana is a little fool, and without any sense at all.’

‘She is in love,’ answered the Marquis, ‘with a man called Frederick.’

‘*Incroyable!*’ Léonie exclaimed. ‘Tell me all about him at once. He sounds very disagreeable.’

The Duke looked across the room at his son. ‘One was led to suppose from Fanny’s somewhat incoherent discourse that the young man is impossible!’

‘Oh, quite, sir,’ agreed Vidal. ‘But she’ll have him for all that.’

‘Well, if she loves him, I hope she will marry him,’ said Léonie,