

One

It was past two o'clock when the job-chaise turned into Hill Street; and, as the watchman wending his way round Berkeley Square monotonously announced, a fine night. A full moon rode in the cloudless sky, dimming the street-lamps: even, as the solitary traveller had noticed, in Pall Mall, where gas-lighting had replaced the oil-burners. Linkmen, carriages, and light streaming from an open door on the east side of Berkeley Square indicated that not all the members of the ton had left London; but at the end of June the Season was drawing to a close; and it did not surprise the traveller to find Hill Street deserted. It would not have surprised him if the knocker had been removed from the door of a certain house on the north side of the street, but when the chaise drew up a swift scrutiny reassured him: the Earl of Denville's town residence had not yet been abandoned for the summer months. The traveller, a young man, wearing a tasselled and corded Polish greatcoat, and a shallow-crowned beaver, sprang down from the chaise, dragged a bulging portmanteau from the floor of this vehicle, set it down on the flagway, and pulled out his purse. The postboys paid, he picked up the portmanteau, trod up the steps to the front-door, and gave the iron bell-pull a tug.

By the time the last echo of the clapper died away the chaise had disappeared, but no one had responded to the bell's summons. The traveller gave it a second, and more vigorous, tug. He heard it clanging somewhere in the nether regions, but

was forced to conclude, after waiting for several minutes, that it had failed to rouse any of my lord's servants.

He considered the matter. It was possible, though unlikely, that the household had removed from London without taking the knocker from the door, or shuttering the windows. To verify that the windows had not been shuttered he retreated to the flagway, and scanned the house, perceiving that not only were all the windows unshuttered but that one of them, on the entrance-floor, had been left open a few inches at the top. This gave, as he knew, on to the dining-room; and to reach it presented a lithe and determined young man with no insuperable difficulty. Divesting himself of his greatcoat, and trusting that no watchman would come down the street in time to observe his clandestine entry, he proceeded to demonstrate to the uninterested moon that Colonel Dan Mackinnon, of the Coldstream Guards, was not without a rival in the art of perilous climbing.

No such thought entered the Hon. Christopher Fancot's head: he was not acquainted with Colonel Mackinnon; and he did not think the feat of reaching the desired window-sill either dangerous or difficult. Once there it was easy to thrust up the lower sash, and to swing himself into the room. A couple of minutes later he emerged into the hall, where, upon a marble-topped side-table, he found a lamp burning low, with an unlit candle in a silver holder standing beside it. Observing these objects with an intelligent eye, Mr Fancot concluded that their noble owner had told his servants not to wait up for him. The subsequent discovery that the front-door was unbolted confirmed him in this belief. As he opened the door, to retrieve his belongings from the porch, he reflected, with an inward chuckle, that when his lordship did come home at last he would find his bed occupied by a most unlooked-for visitor, and would in all probability think that he was a great deal boskier than he had supposed.

On this thought, which appeared, from the mischievous smile which played about the corners of his mouth, to afford Mr Fancot amusement, he kindled the candle at the lamp's low flame, and made his way towards the staircase.

He went softly up, the candlestick held in one hand, his portmanteau in the other, and his greatcoat flung over his shoulder. No creaking stair betrayed him, but as he rounded the bend in the second flight a door opened on the floor above, and a voice said anxiously: 'Evelyn?'

He looked up, seeing, in the light of a bedroom-candle held aloft in a fragile hand, a feminine form enveloped in a cloud of lace, which was caught together by ribbons of the palest green satin. From under a nightcap of charming design several ringlets the colour of ripe corn had been allowed to escape. The gentleman on the stairs said appreciatively: '*What* a fetching cap, love!'

The vision thus addressed heaved a sigh of relief, but said, with a gurgle of laughter: 'You absurd boy! Oh, Evelyn, I'm so thankful you've come, but what in the world has detained you? I've been sick with apprehension!'

There was a quizzical gleam in the gentleman's eyes, but he said in accents of deep reproach: 'Come, come, Mama —!'

'It may be very well for you to say *Come, come, Mama,*' she retorted, 'but when you faithfully promised to return not a day later than —' She broke off, staring down at him in sudden doubt.

Abandoning the portmanteau, the gentleman shrugged the greatcoat from his shoulder, pulled off his hat, and mounted the remaining stairs two at a time, saying still more reproachfully: 'No, really, Mama! How *can* you be so unnatural a parent?'

'*Küt!*' uttered his unnatural parent, in a smothered shriek. 'Oh, my darling, my *dearest* son!'

Mr Fancot, receiving his widowed mama on his bosom, caught her in a comprehensive hug, but said, on a note of laughter: 'Oh, what a rapper! *I'm* not your dearest son!'

Standing on tiptoe to kiss his lean cheek, and dropping wax from her tilted candle down the sleeve of his coat, Lady Denville replied with dignity that she had never felt the smallest preference for either of her twin sons.

'Of course not! How should you, when you can't tell us apart?' said Mr Fancot, prudently removing the candlestick from her grasp.

'I *can* tell you apart!' she declared. 'If I had expected to see you I should have recognized you instantly! The thing was, I thought you were in Vienna.'

'No, I'm here,' said Mr Fancot, smiling lovingly down at her. 'Stewart gave me leave of absence: are you pleased?'

'Oh, no, not a bit!' she said, tucking her hand in his arm, and drawing him into her bedchamber. 'Let me look at you, wicked one! Oh, I can't see you properly! Light all the candles, dearest, and then we may be comfortable. The money that is spent on candles in this house! I shouldn't have thought it possible if Dinting hadn't shown me the chandler's bill which, I must say, I wish she had not, for what, I ask you, Kit, is the use of knowing the cost of candles? One must have them, after all, and even your father never desired me to purchase tallow ones.'

'I suppose one might burn fewer,' remarked Kit, applying a taper to some half-dozen which stood in two chandeliers on the dressing-table.

'No, no, nothing more dismal than an ill-lit room! Light the ones on the mantelpiece, dearest! Yes, that is much better! Now come and tell me all about yourself!'

She had drifted over to an elegant day-bed, and patted it invitingly, but Kit did not immediately obey the summons. He stood looking about him at the scene he had illumined, exclaiming: 'Why, how is this, Mama? You were used to live in a rose-garden, and now one would think oneself at the bottom of the sea!'

As this was the impression she had hoped to create when, at stupendous cost, she had had the room redecorated in varying shades of green, she was pleased, and said approvingly: 'Exactly so! I can't think how I endured those commonplace roses for so long – particularly when poor Mr Brummell told me years ago that I was one of the few females whom green becomes better than any other colour.'

'It does,' he agreed. His eyes alighted on the bed, and crinkled at the corners as he saw that the billowing curtains were of gauze. 'Very dashing! Improper, too.'

An enchanting ripple of laughter broke from her. 'Fudge! Do you think the room pretty?'

He came to sit beside her, raising her hands to his lips, and planting a kiss in its palm. 'Yes, like yourself: pretty and absurd!' 'And like you!' she retorted.

He dropped her hand, not unnaturally revolted. 'Good God —! *No*, Mama!'

'Well, absurd, at all events,' she amended, thinking, however, that it would have been impossible to have found two more handsome men than her twin sons.

The Polite World, to which they belonged, would have said, more temperately, that the Fancot twins were a good-looking pair, but by no means as handsome as had been their father. Neither had inherited the classical regularity of his features: they favoured their mother; and although she was an accredited Beauty dispassionate persons were agreed that her loveliness lay not so much in any perfection of countenance as in her vivacious charm. This, asserted her more elderly admirers, was comparable to the charm of the Fifth Duke of Devonshire's first wife. There were other points of resemblance between her and the Duchess: she adored her children, and she was recklessly extravagant.

As for Kit Fancot, at four-and-twenty he was a well-built young man, slightly above the average height, with good shoulders, and an excellent leg for the prevailing fashion of skin-tight pantaloons. He was darker than his mother, his glossy locks showing more chestnut than gold; and there was a firmness about his mouth which hers lacked. But his eyes were very like hers: lively, their colour between blue and gray, and laughter rarely far from them. He had her endearing smile as well; and this, with his easy unaffected manners, made him a general favourite. He was as like his brother as fourpence to a groat, only those most intimately acquainted with them being able to tell them apart. What difference there was did not lie perceptibly in feature or in stature, unless they were stood side by side, when it could be seen that Kit was a shade taller than Evelyn, and that

Evelyn's hair showed a trifle more burnished gold than Kit's. Only the very discerning could detect the real difference between them, for it was subtle, and one of expression: Kit's eyes were the kinder, Evelyn's the more brilliant; each was more ready to laugh than to frown, but Kit could look grave for no reason that Evelyn could discover; and Evelyn could plummet from gaiety to despair in a manner foreign to one of Kit's more even temper. As children they had squabbled amicably, and turned as one to annihilate any intruder into their factions; during boyhood it had been Evelyn who inaugurated their more outrageous exploits, and Kit who extricated them from the consequences. When they grew to manhood circumstances separated them for long stretches of time, but neither physical separation nor mental divergence weakened the link between them. They were not in the least unhappy when apart, for each had his own interests, but when they met after many months it was as though they had been parted for no more than a week.

Since they had come down from Oxford they had seen little of one another. It was the custom of their house for a younger son to embrace a political career, and Kit entered the diplomatic service, under the patronage of his uncle, Henry Fancot, who had just been rewarded for his labours in the ambassadorial field with a barony. He was sent first to Constantinople; but as his appointment as a junior secretary coincided with a period of calm in Turkey's history he soon began to wish that he had persuaded his father to buy him a pair of colours; and even to wonder, with the optimism of one who had not yet attained his majority, whether it might not be possible to convince his lordship that he had mistaken his vocation. Stirring events were taking place in Europe; and it seemed intolerable to a spirited youth already dedicated to the service of his country to be thrust into a backwater. Fortunately, since the late Earl was quite the most unyielding of parents, he was transferred to St Petersburg before the monotony of his first appointment had goaded him into revolt. If he had owed his start in diplomatic life to his uncle, it was his father who was

responsible for his second step: Lord Denville might be inflexible, but he was sincerely attached to Kit, and not altogether unsympathetic. His health was uncertain, and for several years he had taken little part in politics, but he had some good friends in the administration. Kit was sent, at the end of 1813, to join General Lord Cathcart's staff, and thereafter had neither the time nor the inclination to complain of boredom. Cathcart was not only ambassador to the Tsar, but also the British Military Commissioner attached to his armies, and in his train Kit saw much of the successful campaign of 1814. For his part, Cathcart accepted Kit unenthusiastically, and would have paid no more heed to him than to any of his other secretaries if his son had not struck up an instant friendship with him. George Cathcart, a very youthful lieutenant in the 6th Dragoon Guards, was acting as his father's military aide-de-camp. Much of his time was spent in carrying dispatches to the several English officers attached to the Russian armies, but whenever he returned to what he insisted on calling headquarters he naturally sought out his only contemporary on the ambassadorial staff. Inevitably, Kit came under his lordship's eye, and soon found favour. Cathcart thought him a likeable boy, with a good understanding, and easy manners: exactly the sort of well-bred lad who was invaluable to an overworked and elderly diplomat obliged to entertain on the grand scale. He had tact and address, and, for all his engaging lightheartedness, an instinctive discretion. When his lordship journeyed to Vienna to attend the Congress there, he took Kit with him. And there Kit had remained. Lord Castlereagh, noticing him with aloof kindness for his uncle's sake, introduced him to the newly appointed ambassador, who happened to be his own half-brother, and Lord Stewart took a fancy to him. What Kit thought of Stewart, whom the irreverent at the Congress dubbed Lord Pumpnickel, he kept to himself; and if he was sorry to leave Cathcart he was glad not to be sent back to St Petersburg when the war was over. By then he had not only recovered from envy of George Cathcart's rare good fortune in

having been appointed to Wellington's staff in time to have been present at Waterloo, but had become so much interested in the tangled policies of the Peace that St Petersburg would have seemed to him almost as remote from the hub of international affairs as Constantinople.

He had met Evelyn abroad twice in the past two years, but he had only once visited England, to attend his father's funeral.

Lord Denville had died, quite suddenly, in the early spring of 1816; and since that date, some fifteen months previously, Lady Denville had not set eyes on her younger son. She thought at first that he had not altered at all, and said so. Then she corrected herself, and said: 'No, that's silly! You look older – of course you do! I am remembering how you were used to look, or trying to. The thing is, you see, that Evelyn is older too, so I've grown accustomed. You are still exactly like him, you know. Dearest, I wish you will tell me how it comes about that you're here so suddenly! Have you brought home a dispatch? *Do* you carry dispatches, like officers?'

'No, I'm afraid not,' he answered gravely. 'King's Messengers are employed on that business. I'm here to attend to – to urgent private affairs.'

'Good gracious, Kit, I never knew you had any!' she exclaimed. 'Oh, you're trying to hoax me! Now, why?'

'But I have got urgent private affairs!' he protested. 'You must know I have, Mama! I've become a man of substance, in fact: what you might call a well-breeched swell!'

'I shouldn't call you anything so vulgar! Besides, it isn't true.'

'How can you say so, when my godfather was so obliging as to leave his fortune to me?' he said reproachfully.

'Is *that* what you mean? But it isn't a fortune, Kit! I wish it were – and I must own I thought it would be, for Mr Bembridge was always said to be very well to pass, only it turns out to be no such thing, and he was possessed merely of what Adlestrop, detestable creature, calls a *competence*. Poor man! I daresay it was not his fault, so you mustn't blame him!'

'I don't! A pretty easy competence, Mama!'

‘A competence,’ stated her ladyship, with conviction, ‘cannot be described as *easy*! You are talking like Adlestrop, and I wish you will not!’

Kit was aware that the family’s man of business had never been a favourite with his mother, but these embittered references to him seemed to call for explanation. ‘What’s Adlestrop done to offend you, Mama?’ he asked.

‘Adlestrop is a – Oh, let’s not talk about him! Such a screw, and so *malignant*! I can’t think why I mentioned him, except that he told me, when Mr Bembridge died, that there was no occasion for you to come home, because there are no estates in question, or anything you might be obliged to attend to yourself – nothing but those detestable *Funds*, whatever they may be – and pray don’t tell me, Kit, for you might as well talk gibberish! I perfectly understand that they are *holy*, and must on no account be touched; and, for my part, I would never invest my money in anything so stupid!’

‘Of course you wouldn’t!’ agreed Kit. ‘It would never stay in your purse long enough to be invested in anything!’

She considered this for a moment, and then sighed, and said: ‘No; that’s true! It is the most lowering reflection. I have frequently tried to cultivate habits of economy, but I don’t seem to have the knack of it. None of the Cliffes have! And the dreadful thing is, Kit, that such habits only lead to *waste*!’

He gave a shout of laughter, but, although her eyes twinkled sympathetically, she said earnestly: ‘Yes, but they *do*! I purchased a cheap gown once, because Papa cut up stiff over one of Céleste’s bills, but it was so horrid that I was obliged to give it to Rimpton, without *once* wearing it! And when I gave orders for an economical dinner Papa got up from the table, and went straight off to the Clarendon, which is quite the most expensive hotel in London! Yes, you may laugh, but you have no experience of such matters. I assure you, the instant you begin to practise economy you will find yourself spending far more than ever you did before you embarked on such a ruinous course!’

‘No, shall I? Perhaps I had better sell out of the Funds immediately, and start wasting the ready!’

‘Nonsense! I know very well you haven’t come home to do *that!* So what *has* brought you home, dearest? I’m persuaded it wasn’t to look after these prodigious affairs of yours, so don’t try to bamboozle me!’

‘Well – not entirely,’ he admitted. He hesitated, colouring a little, and then said, meeting her look of inquiry: ‘To own the truth, I took a notion into my head – stupid, I daresay, but I couldn’t be rid of it – that Evelyn is in some sort of trouble – or just botheration, perhaps – and might need me. So I made my prodigious affairs serve as a reason for wanting leave of absence. Now tell me I’m an airdreamer! I wish you may!’

She said instead, in a marvelling tone: ‘Do you still get these feelings, both of you? As though one’s own troubles were not enough to bear!’

‘I see: I am *not* an airdreamer. What’s amiss, Mama?’

‘Oh, nothing, Kit! That is to say – well, nothing you can cure, and nothing at all if Evelyn returns tomorrow!’

‘Returns? Where is he?’

‘I don’t know!’ disclosed her ladyship. ‘No one knows!’

He looked startled, and, at the same time, incredulous. Then he remembered that when she had first seen him, and had mistaken him for Evelyn, she had sounded disproportionately relieved. She was not an anxious parent; even when he and Evelyn were children their truancies had never ruffled her serenity; and when they grew up, and failed to return to the parental home at night, she had always been more likely to suppose that she had forgotten they had told her not to look for them for a day or two than to wonder what accident could have befallen them. He said in a rallying tone: ‘Gone off upon the sly, has he? Why should that cast you into high fidgets, Mama? You know what Evelyn is!’

‘Yes, I daresay I shouldn’t even have *noticed* that he wasn’t here, at any other moment! But he assured me, when he left

London, that he would return within a sennight, and he has been away now for *ten days!*'

'So —?'

'You don't understand, Kit! *Everything* hangs upon his return! He is to dine in Mount Street tomorrow, to be presented to old Lady Stavely, and she has come up from Berkshire particularly to make his acquaintance. Only think how dreadful if he were to fail! We shall be at fiddlestick's end, for she is odiously starched-up, you know, and I collect, from something Stavely said to me, that already she doesn't like it above half.'

'Doesn't like *what* above half?' interrupted Kit, quite bewildered. 'Who is she, and why the deuce does she want to make Evelyn's acquaintance?'

'Oh, dear, hasn't Evelyn told you? No, I daresay there has been no time for a letter to reach you. The thing is that he has offered for Miss Stavely; and although Stavely was very well pleased, and Cressy herself not in the least unwilling, all depends upon *old* Lady Stavely. You must know that Stavely stands in the most absurd awe of her, and would turn short about if she only *frowned* upon the match! He is afraid for his life that she may leave her fortune to his brother, if he offends her. I must say, Kit, it almost makes me thankful I have no fortune! How could I bear it if my beloved sons were thrown into quakes by the very thought of me?'

He smiled a little at that. 'I don't think we should be. But this engagement — how comes it about that Evelyn never so much as hinted at it? I can't recall that he mentioned Miss Stavely in any of his letters. You didn't either, Mama. It must have been very sudden, surely? I'll swear Evelyn wasn't thinking of marriage when last I heard from him, and that's no more than a month ago. Is Miss Stavely very beautiful? Did he fall in love with her at first sight?'

'No, no! I mean, he has been acquainted with her for — oh, a long time! Three years at least.'

'And has only now popped the question? That's not like him! I never knew him to tumble into love but what he did so after no

more than one look. You don't mean to tell me he has been trying for three years to fix his interest with the girl? It won't fadge, my dear: I know him too well!

'No, of course not. You don't understand, Kit! This is not one of his – his *flirtations!*' She saw laughter spring into his eyes, tried to keep a solemn look in her own, and failed lamentably. They danced with wicked mirth, but she said with a very fair assumption of severity: 'Or anything of *that* nature! He has outgrown such – such follies!'

'Has he indeed?' said Mr Fancot politely.

'Yes – well, at all events he means to reform his way of life! And now that he is the head of the family there is the succession to be considered, you know.'

'So there is!' said Mr Fancot, much struck. 'What a gudgeon I am! Why, if any fatal accident were to befall him *I* should succeed to his room! He would naturally exert himself to the utmost to cut me out. I wonder why that should never before have occurred to me?'

'Oh, Kit, must you be so odious? You know very well –'

'Just so, Mama!' he said, as she faltered, and stopped. 'How would it be if you told me the truth?'

Two

There was a short silence. She met his look, and heaved a despairing sigh. 'It is your Uncle Henry's fault,' she disclosed. 'And your father's!' She paused, and then said sorrowfully: 'And mine! Try as I will, I cannot deny that, Kit! To be sure, I thought that when your Papa died I should be able to discharge some of my debts, and be perfectly comfortable, but that was before I understood about jointures. Dearest, did you know that they are nothing but a *take-in*? No, how should you? But so it is! And, what is more,' she added impressively, 'one's creditors *do* know it! Which makes one wonder why they should take it into their heads to dun me now that I am a widow, in a much more disagreeable way than ever they did when Papa was alive. It seems quite idiotish to me, besides being so unfeeling!'

He had spent few of his adult years at home, but this disclosure came as no surprise to him. For as long as he could remember poor Mama's financial difficulties had been the cause of discomfort in his home. There had been painful interludes which had left Lady Denville in great distress; these had led to coldness, and estrangement, and to a desperate policy of concealment.

The Earl had been a man of upright principles, but he was not a warm-hearted man, and his mind was neither lively nor elastic. He was fifteen years older than his wife, and he belonged as much by temperament as by age to a generation of rigid etiquette. He had only once allowed his feelings to overcome his judgement, when he had succumbed to the charm of the lovely

Lady Amabel Cliffe, lately enlarged from the schoolroom to become the rage of the ton, and had offered for her hand in marriage. Her father, the Earl of Baverstock, was the possessor of impoverished estates and a numerous progeny, and he had accepted the offer thankfully. But the very qualities which had fascinated Denville in the girl offended him in the wife, and he set himself to the task of eradicating them. His efforts were unsuccessful, and resulted merely in imbuing her with a dread of incurring his displeasure. She remained the same loving, irresponsible creature with whom he had become infatuated; but she lavished her love on her twin sons, and did her best to conceal from her husband the results of her imprudence.

The twins adored her. Unable to detect beneath their father's unbending formality his real, if temperate, affection, they became at an early age their mama's champions. She played with them, laughed with them, sorrowed with them, forgave them their sins, and sympathized with them in their dilemmas: they could perceive no fault in her, and directed their energies, as they grew up, to the task of protecting her from the censure of their formidable father.

Mr Fancot, therefore, was neither surprised nor shocked to discover that his mother was encumbered by debt. He merely said: 'Scorched, love? Just how does the land lie?'

'I don't know. Well, dearest, how *can* one remember everything one has borrowed for years and years?'

That did startle him a little. 'Years and years? But, Mama, when you were obliged to disclose to my father the fix you were in – three years ago, wasn't it? – didn't he ask you for the sum total of your debts, and promise that they should be discharged?'

'Yes, he did say that,' she answered. 'And I didn't tell him. Well, I didn't *know*, but I'm not trying to excuse myself, and I own I shouldn't have done so even if I had known. I can't explain it to you, Kit, and if you mean to say that it was very wrong of me, and cowardly, *don't*, because I am miserably aware of it! Only, when Adlestrop wrote down everything I said –'

'What?' exclaimed Kit. 'Are you telling me he was present?'

‘Yes – oh, yes! Well, your father reposed complete confidence in him, and it has always been he, you know, who managed everything, so –’

‘Pretty well, for one who set so much store by propriety!’ he interrupted, his eyes kindling. ‘To admit his man of business into such an interview –!’

‘I own, I wished he had not, but I daresay he was obliged to. On account of its being Adlestrop who knew just what the estate could bear, and –’

‘Adlestrop is a very good man in his way, and I don’t doubt he has our interests at heart, but he’s a purse-leech, and so my father should have known! If ever a grig was spent out of the way he always behaved as if we should all of us go home by beggar’s bush!’

‘Yes, that’s what Evelyn says,’ she agreed. ‘I *might* have been able to have told Papa the whole, if he hadn’t brought Adlestrop into it – that is, if I had known what it was. Indeed, I had the intention of being perfectly open with him! But whatever my faults I am not a – a *mawworm*, Kit, so I shan’t attempt to deceive you! I don’t think I *could* have been open with Papa. Well, you know how it was whenever he was displeased with one, don’t you? But if I had known that my wretched affairs would fall upon Evelyn I *must* have plucked up my courage to the sticking-point, and disclosed the whole to him.’

‘If you had known what the whole was!’ he interpolated irrepressibly.

‘Yes, or if I could have brought myself to place my affairs in Adlestrop’s hands.’

‘Good God, no! It should have been a matter between you and my father. But there’s no occasion for you to be blue-devilled because your affairs have fallen on Evelyn: he must always have been concerned in them, you know, and it makes no difference to him whether my father discharged your debts, or left it to him to do so.’

‘But you are quite wrong!’ she objected. ‘It makes a great deal of difference. Evelyn *cannot* discharge them!’

‘Stuff!’ he said. ‘He has no more notion of economy than you have, but don’t try to tell me that he has contrived, in little more than a year, to dissipate his inheritance! That’s coming it too strong!’

‘Certainly not! It isn’t in his power to do so. Not that I mean to say he would wish to, for however *volatile* your father believed him to be, he has no such intention! And I must say, Kit, I consider it was most unjust of Papa to have left everything in that uncomfortable way, telling your Uncle Henry that he had done so because Evelyn was as volatile as I am! For he never knew about the two worst scrapes Evelyn was in, because *you* brought him off from his entanglement with that dreadful harpy who got her claws into him when you both came down from Oxford – and how you did it, Kit, I have *long* wanted to know! – and it was *I* who paid his gaming debts when he was drawn into some Pall Mall hell when he was by far too green to know what he was doing! I sold my diamond necklace, and your papa knew nothing whatsoever about it! So why he should have told your uncle that –’

‘You did *what*?’ Kit interrupted, shaken for the first time during this session with his adored parent.

She smiled brilliantly upon him. ‘I had it copied, of course! I’m not such a goose that I didn’t think of *that*! It looks *just* as well, and what should I care for diamonds when one of my sons was on the rocks?’

‘But it was an heirloom!’

‘I have no opinion of heirlooms,’ said her ladyship flatly. ‘If you mean to say that it belonged to Evelyn, I know it did, but, pray, what *use* was it to him, when what he needed, quite desperately, poor love, was the money to pay his gaming debts? I told him about it afterwards, and I assure you he made not the least objection!’

‘I daresay! And what of *his* son?’ demanded Kit.

‘Dearest, you are too absurd! How should *he* raise an objection when he won’t know anything about it?’

‘Have you – have you disposed of any more heirlooms?’ he

asked, regarding her with awe, and some reluctant amusement.

‘No, I don’t think so. But you know what a wretched memory I have! In any event, it doesn’t signify, because what’s done is done, and I have more important things to think of than a lot of hideous family jewels. Dearest, do, pray, stop being frivolous!’

‘I didn’t mean to be frivolous,’ he said meekly.

‘Well, don’t ask me stupid questions about heirlooms, or talk nonsense about its being as easy for Evelyn to pay my debts as it would have been for your papa. You must have read that hateful Will! Poor Evelyn has no more command over Papa’s fortune than you have! Everything was left to your uncle’s discretion!’

He frowned a little. ‘I remember that my father created some kind of Trust, but not that it extended to the income from the estate. My uncle has neither the power to withhold that, nor to question Evelyn’s expenditure. As I recall, Evelyn was prohibited from disposing of any part of his principal, except with my uncle’s consent, until he reaches the age of thirty, unless, at some time before that date, my uncle should judge him to have outgrown his – his volatility (don’t eat me, Mama!), when the Trust might be brought to an end, and Evelyn put in undisputed possession of his inheritance. I know I thought my father need not have fixed on thirty as the proper age: twenty-five would have been a great deal more reasonable, and in no way remarkable. Evelyn was vexed, of course – who wouldn’t have been? – but it made very little difference to him, after all. You’ve said yourself that he has no intention of wasting his principal. You know, Mama, the income is pretty considerable! What’s more, my uncle told him at the time that he was prepared to consent to the sale of certain stocks, to defray whatever large debts Evelyn had incurred – particularly any post-obit bonds – since he thought it not right that the income should perhaps be reduced to a monkey’s allowance until they had all been paid.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘He did say that, and it quite astonished me, for, in general, he’s as close as wax, Kit!’

‘No: merely, he doesn’t live up to the door, and certainly not beyond it. But the thing is, Mama, that he didn’t wish Evelyn to

succeed my father under a load of debt, and if you had but told him of the fix *you* were in I'm persuaded he would have settled your debts along with the rest.'

She gazed at him incredulously. '*Henry?* You must be out of your mind, Kit! When I think of the way he has always disapproved of me, and the rake-down he gave Evelyn, whose debts were *nothing* compared to mine – Oh, no, no! I had liefer by far put a period to my existence than cast myself on his mercy! He would have imposed the most humiliating conditions on me – condemned me to live the rest of my days in that horrid Dower House at Ravenhurst, very likely! Or worse!'

He was silent for a moment. Knowing that Henry, Lord Brumby, considered his charming sister-in-law incorrigible, he could not help feeling that there was some truth in what she said. His frown deepened; he said abruptly: 'Why the devil didn't Evelyn tell him? He could have handled my uncle so much more easily than you could!'

'Do you think so?' she said doubtfully. 'He never *has* done so. Besides, he didn't know just how things stood with me, because I never thought to tell him. Well, how was I to guess that nearly every soul I owed money to would suddenly start to dun me, and some of them in the rudest way, too? Not that I should have teased Evelyn with my difficulties when he was already in hot water with Henry on his own account. I hope you know me better than to suppose I should do such a selfish thing as that!'

A wry smile twisted his lips. 'I'm beginning to, Mama! I wish you will tell me how you expected to settle matters, though, if you didn't tell Evelyn?'

'Well, I didn't know *then* that I should be obliged to,' she explained. 'I mean, I never *had* done so, except now and then, in a *gradual* way, when I was particularly asked to, so you can imagine what a shock it was to me when Mr Child positively refused – though with *perfect* civility – to lend me £3,000, which would have relieved my immediate difficulties, and even begged me not to overdraw the account by as much as a guinea more – just as if I hadn't paid the interest, which, I promise you, I *did*!'

Mr Fancot, considerably bemused, interrupted, to demand: ‘But what’s this talk of Child, Mama? My father never banked with him!’

‘Oh no, but *my* father did, and your Uncle Baverstock does, of course, now that Grandpapa is dead, so I have been acquainted with Mr Child for ever – a most superior man, Kit, who has always been so very kind to me! – and that is how I come to have an account with him!’

Mr Fancot, his hair lifting gently on his scalp, ventured to inquire more particularly into the nature of his mama’s account with Child’s Bank. As far as he could ascertain from her explanation, it had its sole origin in a substantial loan made to her by the clearly besotted Mr Child. Something in his expression, as he listened in gathering dismay, caused her to break off, laying a hand on his arm, and saying imploringly: ‘Surely you must know how it is when one finds oneself – what does Evelyn call it? – oh, *in the basket!* I collect that has something to do with cockfighting: so disgusting and vulgar! Kit, haven’t *you* got debts?’

He shook his head, a rueful gleam in his eyes. ‘No, I’m afraid I haven’t!’

‘*None?*’ she exclaimed.

‘Well, none that I can’t discharge! I may owe a trifle here and there, but – oh, don’t look at me like that! I promise you I’m not a changeling, love!’

‘How can you be so absurd? Only it seems so *extraordinary* – but I expect you haven’t had the opportunity to run into debt, living abroad as you do,’ she said excusingly.

He gave a gasp, managed to utter: ‘J-just so, Mama!’ and went into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, dropping his head in his hands, and clutching his chestnut locks.

She was not in the least offended, but chuckled responsively, and said: ‘Now you sound like yourself again! Do you know, for a moment – only for a moment! – you looked like your father? You can’t conceive the *feel* it gave me!’

He lifted his head, wiping his streaming eyes. ‘Oh, no, did I?’

Was it very bad? I'll try not to do so again! But tell me! When Child would give you no credit didn't you *then* tell Evelyn?'

'No, though I did think I might be obliged to, till it darted into my mind, in the middle of the night, to apply to Edgbaston for a loan. Isn't it odd, dearest, how often the answer to a problem will flash upon one in the night?'

'Applied to Lord Edgbaston?' he ejaculated.

'Yes, and he agreed to lend me £5,000 – at interest, of course! – and so then I was in funds again. Oh, Kit, don't frown like that! Are you thinking that I should rather have applied to Bonamy Ripple? I couldn't, you see, because he had gone off to Paris, and the matter was – was a little urgent!'

For as long as Kit could remember, this elderly and extremely wealthy dandy had run tame about his home, regarded by himself and Evelyn as a fit subject for ridicule, and by their father with indifference. He had been one of Lady Denville's many suitors, and when she had married Lord Denville he had become her most faithful *cicisbeo*. He was generally supposed to have remained a bachelor for her sake; but since his figure resembled nothing so much as an over-ripe pear, and his countenance was distinguished only by an expression of vacuous amiability and the snuff-stains on his fat cheeks, not even the more determined brewers of scandal-broth could detect anything in his devotion but food for mockery. The twins, inured to his frequent appearances in Hill Street, accepted him with much the same contemptuous tolerance as they would have felt for an over-fed lap-dog which their mama chose to encourage. But although Kit would have hooted with ribald laughter at the suggestion that any impropriety attached to Sir Bonamy's fidelity he was far from thinking it desirable that his mother should apply to him for help in her financial difficulties, and he said so.

'Good gracious, Kit, as though I hadn't often done so!' she exclaimed. 'It is by far the most comfortable arrangement, because he is so rich that he doesn't care how many of my bonds he holds, and never does he demand the interest on the loans he makes me! As for dunning me to repay him, I am persuaded such

a notion never entered his head. He may be absurd, and growing fatter every day, but I have been used to depend on him for years, in all manner of ways! It was he who sold my jewels for me, and had them copied, for instance, besides —’ She stopped abruptly. ‘Oh, I wish I had never mentioned him! It has brought it all back to me! *That* was what made Evelyn go away!’

‘Ripple?’ he asked, wholly at sea.

‘No, Lord Silverdale,’ she replied.

‘For the lord’s sake, Mama —!’ he expostulated. ‘What *are* you talking about? What the deuce has Silverdale to say to anything?’

‘He has a brooch of mine,’ she said, sunk suddenly into gloom. ‘I staked it, when he wouldn’t accept my vowels, and continue playing. Something told me the luck was about to turn, and so it might have, if Silverdale would but have played on. Not that I cared for losing the brooch, for I never liked it above half, and can’t conceive why I should have purchased it. I expect it must have taken my fancy, but I don’t recall why.’

‘Has Evelyn gone off to redeem it?’ he interrupted. ‘Where is Silverdale?’

‘At Brighton. Evelyn said there was no time to be lost in buying the brooch back, so off he posted — at least, he drove himself, in his phaeton, with his new team of grays, and he said that he meant to go first to Ravenhurst, which, indeed, he did —’

‘Just a moment, Mama!’ Kit intervened, the frown returning to his brow. ‘Why did Evelyn feel it necessary to go to Brighton? Of course he was obliged to redeem your brooch — Silverdale must have expected him to do so! — but I should have supposed that a letter to Silverdale, with a draft on his bank for whatever sum the brooch represented, would have answered the purpose.’

Lady Denville raised large, stricken eyes to his face. ‘Yes, but you don’t perfectly understand how it was, dearest. I can’t *think* how I came to be so addlebrained, but when I staked it I had quite forgotten that it was one of the pieces I had had copied! For my part, I consider Silverdale was very well served for having been so quizzical and disobliging about accepting my vowels, but Evelyn said that it was of the first importance to recover the

wretched thing before Silverdale discovered that it was only a copy.'

Mr Fancot drew an audible breath. 'I should rather think he might say so!'

'But, Kit!' said her ladyship earnestly, 'that is *much* more improvident than anything I should dream of doing! I set its value at £500, which *was* the value of the real brooch, but the copy isn't worth a tithe of that! It seems to be quite wickedly extravagant of Evelyn to be squandering such a sum on mere trumpery!'

Mr Fancot toyed for a moment with the idea of explaining to his erratic parent that her view of the matter was, to put it mildly, incorrect. But only for a moment. He was an intelligent young man, and he almost instantly realized that any such attempt would be a waste of breath. So he merely said, as soon as he could command his voice to say anything: 'Yes, well, never mind that! When did Evelyn set forth on this errand?'

'Dear one, you cannot have been attending! I *told* you! Ten days ago!'

'Well, it wouldn't have taken him ten days to accomplish it, if Silverdale was in Brighton, so it seems that he can't have been there. Evelyn must have discovered where he was gone to, and decided to follow him.'

She brightened. 'Oh, do you think that is what happened? I have been a prey to the most *hideous* forebodings! But if Silverdale has gone to that place of his in Yorkshire it is very understandable that Evelyn shouldn't have returned yet.' She paused, considering the matter, and then shook her head. 'No. Evelyn didn't go to Yorkshire. He spent one night at Ravenhurst, just as he told me he would; and then he drove to Brighton. That I *do* know, for his groom accompanied him; but whether he found Silverdale there or not I can't tell, because, naturally, Challow doesn't know. But he returned to Ravenhurst the same day, and stayed the night there. I thought he would do that – in fact, I thought he must have stayed for several days, for he told me that he had matters to attend to at home, and might be absent from

London for perhaps as much as a sennight. But he left Ravenhurst the very next morning, and under the most *peculiar* circumstances!

‘In what way peculiar, Mama?’

‘He took only his night-bag with him, and he sent Challow back to London with the rest of his gear, saying that he had no need of him.’

‘Oh!’ said Kit. His tone was thoughtful, but not astonished. ‘Did he tell Challow where he was going?’

‘No, and that is another circumstance which makes me very uneasy.’

‘It need not,’ he said, amusement flickering in his eyes. ‘Did he send his valet back to London too? I take it that Fimber is still with him?’

‘Yes, and that is *another* thing that cuts up my peace! He wouldn’t take Fimber to Sussex: he said there was no room for him in the phaeton, which is true, of course, though it set up all Fimber’s bristles. I must own that I wished he might have found room for him, because I *know* Fimber will never let him come to harm. Challow is very good too, but not – not as *firm*! It is the greatest comfort to know that they are both with Evelyn when he goes off on one of his starts.’

‘I’m sure it is, Mama,’ he said gravely.

‘But that’s just it!’ she pointed out. ‘*Neither* is with him! Kit, it’s no laughing matter! I’m persuaded that some accident has befallen him, or that he’s in some dreadful scrape! How *can* you laugh?’

‘I couldn’t, if I thought it was true. Now, come out of the dismals, Mama! I never knew you to be such a goose! What do you imagine could have happened to Evelyn?’

‘You don’t think – you don’t think that he did see Silverdale, and quarrelled with him, and – and went off alone that day to *meet* him?’

‘Taking his night-bag with him in place of a second! Good God, no! You *have* put yourself into the hips, love! If I know Evelyn, he’s gone off on a private affair which he don’t want you

to know anything about! You would, if he had taken Fimber or Challow with him, and he's well aware of that. They may be a comfort to you, my dear, but they're often a curst embarrassment to him! As for accidents – fudge! You'd have been apprised of anything of that nature: depend upon it, he didn't set out to visit Silverdale without his card-case!

'No, very true!' she agreed. 'I never thought of that!' Her spirits revived momentarily, only to sink again. Her beautiful eyes clouded; she said: 'But at such a moment, Kit! When so much hinges upon his presenting himself in Mount Street tomorrow! Oh, no, he *could* not have gone off on one of his adventures!'

'Couldn't he?' said Kit. 'I wonder! I wish you will tell me a little more about this engagement of his, Mama. You've said that there has been no time for him to tell me about it himself, but that's doing it very much too brown, my dear! There might have been no time for a letter to have reached me, telling me that he had come to the point of offering for this girl; but he never mentioned her name to me in the last letter I had from him, far less the possibility that he would shortly be married; and that, you know, is so unlike him that if anyone but you had broken this news to me I should have thought it a Banbury story. Now, I know of only one reason which would make Evelyn withhold his confidence from me.' He paused, his eyelids puckering, as though he were trying to bring some remote object into focus. 'If he were in some fix from which I couldn't help him to escape – if he were forced into doing something repugnant to him –'

'Oh, no, no, no!' cried Lady Denville distressfully. 'It is *not* repugnant to him, and he was *not* forced into it! He discussed it with me in the most reasonable manner, saying that while he was resolved on matrimony, he believed it would suit him best to – to enter upon a contract in the old-fashioned way, without violence of feeling on either side. And I must say, Kit, that I think he is very right, for the females he falls in love with are *never* eligible – in fact, excessively *ineligible*! Moreover, he is so very prone to fall in love, poor boy, that it is of the first importance to arrange a

match for him with a sensible, well-bred girl who won't break her heart, or come to points with him, every time she discovers that he has a *chère amie*.'

'Of the first importance –!' he exclaimed. 'For Evelyn, of all men! I collect that if she is sufficiently indifferent and well-bred nothing else is of consequence! She may be bran-faced or swivel-eyed or –'

'On the contrary! It goes without saying that there must be nothing in her appearance to give Evelyn a disgust of her; and also that each of them should be ready to like the other.'

He sprang up, ejaculating: 'Oh, good God!' He glanced down at her, his eyes very bright, but not with laughter. '*You* made such a marriage, Mama! Is that what you wish Evelyn to do? Is it?'

She did not answer for a moment; and when she did speak it was with a little constriction. 'I didn't make such a marriage, Kit. Your father fell in love with me. The Fancots said he was besotted, but nothing would turn him from his determination to marry me. And I – well, I was just seventeen, and he was so handsome, so exactly like the heroes schoolgirls dream of –! But the Fancots were right: we were very ill-suited.'

He said, in an altered tone: 'I didn't know – I beg your pardon, Mama! I shouldn't have spoken to you so. But you haven't told me the truth. All this talk of Evelyn's being *resolved on matrimony*, as though he were four-and-thirty rather than four-and-twenty –! Flummery!'

'I have told you the truth!' she declared indignantly. She read disbelief in his face, and amended this statement. 'Well, *some* of it, anyway!'

He could not help smiling at this. 'Tell me all the truth! A little while ago you said it was my uncle's fault – also your fault – but in what conceivable way could either of you make it necessary for Evelyn to contract a marriage of convenience? Evelyn doesn't depend on my uncle for his livelihood, nor is he answerable to him for anything he may choose to do! The only power my uncle has is to refuse to permit him to spend any part of his principal – if he should wish to do so!'