

One

It was dusk when the London to Little Hampton stagecoach lurched into the village of Billingshurst, and a cold mist was beginning to creep knee-high over the dimly seen countryside. The coach drew up at an inn, and the steps were let down to enable a passenger to alight. A lady, soberly dressed in a drab-coloured pelisse and a round bonnet without a feather, descended on to the road. While she waited for a corded trunk and a valise to be extricated from the boot, the coachman, finding himself to be some minutes ahead of his timesheet, hitched up his reins, clambered down from the box, and in defiance of the regulations governing the conduct of stagecoachmen, rolled into the tap-room in search of such stimulant as would enable him to accomplish the remainder of the journey without endangering an apparently enfeebled constitution.

The passenger, meanwhile, stood in the roadway with her trunk at her feet, and looked about her in a little uncertainty. She was expecting to be met, but as her experience had taught her that the gig was more commonly employed for the purpose of picking up the new governess than the carriage used by her employers, she hesitated to approach the only conveyance she could perceive, which was a light travelling coach, drawn up on the opposite side of the road. While she stood looking about her, however, a servant jumped down from the box, and came up to her, touching his hat, and enquiring whether she would be the young lady who had come down from London in answer to the advertisement. Upon her assenting, he made her a little bow,

picked up the valise, and led the way across the road to the travelling coach. She stepped up into it, her spirits insensibly rising at this unlooked-for-attention to her comfort; and was further gratified by the servant's spreading a rug over her knees and expressing the hope that she would not feel chilled by the evening air. The steps were put up, the door shut, the trunk bestowed on the roof, and in a very few moments the coach moved forward, bowling along in a well-sprung manner that formed a pleasing contrast to the jolting the stage-coach passenger had been enduring for several hours.

She leaned back against the squabs with a sigh of relief. The stage had been crowded, and her journey an uncomfortable one. She wondered whether she would ever become accustomed to the disagreeable economies of poverty. Since she had had every opportunity of inuring herself to these over a period of six years, it seemed unlikely. Dispirited, but determined not to give way to melancholy reflections, she turned her thoughts away from the evils of her situation, and tried instead to speculate upon the probable character of her new post.

It had been with no high hopes that she had set out from London earlier in the day. Her employer, seen once only in a quelling interview at Fenton's Hotel, had disclosed no hint of the kindly impulse that must have caused her to send her own carriage to meet the governess. Miss Elinor Rochdale had been misled into thinking her massive bosom as hard as her rather prominent eyes, and, had any other choice offered, would have had no hesitation in declining a post in her household. But no other choice had offered. There were too often young gentlemen at a susceptible age in families requiring a governess, and Miss Rochdale was too young and too well-favoured to be eligible, in the eyes of most provident Mamas, for the position. Happily, however – for Miss Rochdale's savings were negligible, and her pride still too great to allow of her remaining longer as the guest of her own old governess – Mrs Macclesfield's only male offspring was a sturdy lad of seven. He was, by his mother's account, high-spirited, and of so sensitive a temperament that

the exercise of the greatest tact and persuasion was necessary to control his activities. Six years earlier, Miss Rochdale would have shrunk from the horrors so clearly in store for her, but those years had taught her that the ideal situation was rarely to be found, and that where there was no spoiled child to make the governess's life a burden, she would in all likelihood be expected to save her employer's purse by performing the menial tasks generally allotted to the second housemaid.

Miss Rochdale tucked the rug more closely round her legs. A thick sheepskin mat upon the floor of the coach protected her feet from the draught, and she snuggled them into it gratefully, almost able to fancy herself once more Miss Rochdale of Feldenhall, travelling in her father's carriage to an evening party. The style of servant who had been sent to fetch her, and the elegance of the equipage, had a little surprised her: she had not supposed Mrs Macclesfield to have been in such comfortable circumstances. Upon first perceiving the coach, she had thought she had seen a crest upon the door-panel, but in the failing light it was easy to be mistaken. She fell to pondering the probable degree of gentility of the establishment ahead of her, and the various characters of its inmates, and since she was of a humorous turn of mind, soon lost herself in the weaving of several very improbable histories.

She was recalled to her surroundings by a perceptible slackening in the pace of the horses, and, looking out of the window, saw that the darkness had by this time closed in. The moon not having yet risen it was impossible to discern anything of the country through which she was being driven, but she gained the impression of a narrow and certainly tortuous lane. She did not know for how long she had been in the coach, but it seemed to be a considerable time. She recollected that Mrs Macclesfield had described her home at Five Mile Ash as being within a short distance of Billingshurst, and could only suppose that the way to it must be more than ordinarily circuitous. But as time went on it became apparent that either Mrs Macclesfield's notions of distance were country ones, or she had been deliberately mendacious.

The journey began to seem unending, but just as Miss Rochdale was entertaining a suspicion that the coachman had lost his way in the darkness the horses slowed from a jog-trot to a walk, and the vehicle swung round at a sharp angle, its wheels encountering an uneven gravel surface, as of a carriage-drive ill-kept. The pace was picked up again, and maintained for a few hundred yards. The coach then drew to a standstill, and the groom once more jumped down from the box.

A faint silver light had begun to illumine the scene, and as she stepped out of the coach Miss Rochdale was just able to see that the house she was about to enter was of a respectable size, although built in a rambling and rather low-pitched style. Two sharp gables, and some very tall chimney-stacks were silhouetted against the night-sky; and a lamp burning in one of the rooms showed that the windows were latticed.

The groom had tugged at the big iron bell some moments before, and the echoes of its distant clanging still sounded when the door was opened. An elderly man in shabby livery held it for Miss Rochdale to enter the house, favouring her, as she passed him, with an intent, and rather anxious scrutiny. She scarcely heeded this, for her attention was claimed by her surroundings, which were surprising enough to cause her to check on the threshold, looking about her in a good deal of bewilderment. What, her startled brain demanded, had the woman she had seen at Fenton's Hotel to do with all this decayed grandeur?

The hall in which she found herself was a large, irregularly shaped room, with a superb oaken stairway at one end of it, and at the other a huge stone fireplace, big enough for the roasting of an ox, thought Miss Rochdale, and with a chimney which might be depended on to gush forth smoke any time some unwise person kindled a fire on the flags beneath it. The plaster ceiling, blackened between the oak beams, showed how correct was Miss Rochdale's prosaic reflection. The stairs and the floor of the hall were alike uncarpeted, and lacked polish; long brocade curtains, which had once been handsome but were now faded and in places worn threadbare, were drawn across the windows; a

heavy gateleg table in the centre of the room bore, besides a film of dust, a riding-whip, a glove, a crumpled newspaper, a tarnished brass bowl possibly intended to hold flowers, but just now full of odds and ends, two pewter mugs, and a snuff-jar; a rusted suit of armour stood near the bottom of the staircase; there was a carved chest against one wall, with a welter of coats cast on the top of it; several chairs, one with a broken cane seat, and the others upholstered in rubbed leather, were scattered about; and on the walls were a number of pictures in heavy gilded frames, three moth-eaten foxes' masks, two pairs of antlers, and a number of ancient horse-pistols and fowling-pieces.

Miss Rochdale's astonished gaze alighted presently on the servant who had admitted her, and she found that he was regarding her with a kind of melancholy curiosity. Something in his demeanour, coupled as it was with the depressing dilapidation all around her, put her forcibly in mind of the more lurid romances to be obtained from a circulating-library. She could almost fancy herself to have been kidnapped, and was forced to summon up all her common sense to dispel the ridiculous notion.

She said, in her pleasant, musical voice: 'I had not thought it had been so far from the coach-stop. I have arrived later than I expected.'

'It's all of twelve miles, miss,' responded the retainer. 'You're to come this way, if you please.'

She followed him across the uneven floor to one of the doors that gave on to the hall. He opened it, but his notion of announcing her seemed to consist merely of a jerk of the head, signifying that she was to enter. After a moment's hesitation, she did so, still more bewildered, and conscious by this time of a little feeling of trepidation.

She found herself in a library. It was quite as untidy as the hall, but a quantity of candles in tarnished wall-brackets threw a warm light over it, and a log fire burned in the grate at the far end of it. Before this fire, one hand resting on the mantelpiece, one booted foot on the fender, stood a gentleman in buckskin

breeches and a mulberry coat, staring down at the leaping flames. As the door closed behind Miss Rochdale, he looked up, and across at her, in a measuring way that might have disconcerted one less accustomed to being weighed up like so much merchandize offered for sale.

He might have been any age between thirty and forty. Miss Rochdale realized that he must be her employer's husband, and was a good deal cheered to discover that besides being a very gentlemanlike-looking man, with a well-favoured countenance and a distinct air of breeding, he was dressed with a neatness and a propriety at welcome variance with his surroundings. He had, in fact, all the appearance of a man of fashion.

He did not move to meet her, so Miss Rochdale advanced into the room, saying: 'Good evening. The servant desired me to enter this room, but perhaps - ?'

It seemed to her that there was a faint look of surprise in his face, but he replied in a cool voice: 'Yes, that was by my orders. Pray be seated! I trust you were not kept waiting at the coach-stop?'

'No, indeed!' she said, taking a chair by the table, and folding her hands over her reticule in her lap. 'The carriage was waiting for me. I must thank you for having sent it.'

'I should certainly doubt of there being a suitable conveyance in these stables,' he said.

This remark, uttered as it was in an indifferent tone, seemed extremely odd to Miss Rochdale. She must have shown that she was taken aback, for he added stiffly: 'I believe that the exact nature of the position offered to you was explained in London?'

'I believe so,' she returned.

'I chose that you should be brought here directly,' he said.

She looked startled. 'I thought - I was under the impression - that this was my destination!'

'It is,' he said, rather grimly. 'However, I do not desire that you should be under any misapprehension. I am giving you the opportunity to see with your own eyes what may not have been adequately described to you, before we come to any

definite bargain.' His level grey eyes swept the disordered room as he spoke, and then returned to their scrutiny of her countenance.

She hoped that she succeeded in preserving it. She said: 'I do not understand you, sir. For my part, I considered myself definitely engaged when I set out from London to come here.'

He bowed slightly. 'Oh, yes! If you still wish it!'

She could not be sure that she did, but the alternative prospect of returning to town to seek another post caused her to say cheerfully: 'I shall do my best, sir, to fill the position satisfactorily.' She detected irony in his steady gaze, and was disconcerted by it. She added, with a slightly heightened colour: 'I was not aware, however, that it was you who had engaged me. I thought —'

'It was unnecessary that you should know it,' he said. 'Once you have made up your mind to the bargain, I have nothing more to say in the matter.'

From what she had seen of his wife she could readily believe this; the only surprise she felt was at his having had any say at all in the matter. Yet his manner was very much that of a man accustomed to command. Feeling herself to be at a loss, she said, after a short pause: 'Perhaps it would be as well if I were to lose no time in making the acquaintance of my charge.'

His lip curled. 'An apt term!' he remarked dryly. 'By all means, but your charge is not at the moment on the premises. You shall see him presently. If what you must already have observed has not daunted you, you encourage me to hope that your resolution will not fail when you are brought face to face with him.'

'I trust not, indeed,' she said, with a smile. 'I was given to understand, I own, that I might find him a trifle — a trifle high-spirited, perhaps.'

'You have either a genius for understatement, ma'am, or the truth was not told you, if that is what you understand.'

She laughed. 'Well, you are very frank, sir! I should not expect to be told quite all the truth, but I might collect it, reading between the lines, I fancy.'

'You are a brave woman!' he said.

Her amusement grew. 'I am sure I am no such thing! I can but contrive as best I may. I daresay he has been a little spoiled?'

'I doubt of there being anything to spoil,' he replied.

The coldly dispassionate tone in which he uttered this remark made her reply in equally chilly accents: 'You do not desire me, I am persuaded, to refine too much upon your words, sir. I am very hopeful of teaching him to mind me in time.'

'Teaching him to mind you?' he repeated, with a strong inflexion of astonishment in his voice. 'You will have performed something indeed if you succeed in doing so! You will have, moreover, the distinction of being the only person to whom he has attended in all his life!'

'Surely, sir, you – ?' she faltered.

'Good God, no!' he said impatiently.

'Well – well, I must put forth my best efforts,' she said.

'If you mean to remain here, you would be better advised to turn your attention to the evils you can more easily remedy,' he said, with another glance of dislike around the room.

She was nettled, and allowed herself to reply with a touch of asperity: 'I was not informed, sir, that it was to fill the position of housekeeper that I was engaged. I am accustomed to keep my own apartment neat and clean, but I can assure you I shall not meddle in the general management of the house.'

He shrugged, and turned away from her to stir the now smouldering log with his foot. 'You will do as seems best to you,' he said. 'It is no concern of mine. But rid your mind of whatever romantic notions it may cherish! Your charge, as you choose to call him, may be induced to accept you, but that is because I can force him to do so, and for not other reason. Do not flatter yourself that he will regard you with complaisance! I do not expect you to remain above a week: you need not remain as long, unless you choose to do so.'

'Not remain above a week!' she exclaimed. 'He cannot be as bad as you would have me think, sir! It is absurd to speak in such a way! Pardon me, but you should not talk so!'

'I wish you to know the truth, to have the opportunity to reconsider your decision.'

A good deal dismayed, she could only say: 'I must do what I can. I own, I had not supposed – but I am not in a position – in a position lightly to decline –'

'No, so, indeed, I apprehended,' he said. 'It could not have been otherwise.'

She stared at him. 'Well! This is frank indeed! I am sure I am at a loss to guess why, having engaged me, you should now be so set on turning me away, sir!'

At that he smiled, which made his somewhat forbidding countenance appear very much more pleasing. 'It is certainly absurd,' he agreed. 'You are not what I had expected, ma'am. I must tell you that I think you too young.'

Her spirits sank. 'I made no secret of my age, sir. I am perhaps older than you imagine. I am six-and-twenty.'

'You look younger,' he commented.

'I hope it need not signify, sir. I assure you, I am not without experience.'

'You can hardly have had experience of what now lies before you,' he retorted.

A dreadful suspicion crossed Miss Rochdale's mind. 'Good heavens, he is not – he surely cannot be – *deranged*, sir?' she exclaimed.

'No, he is quite sane,' he answered. 'It is brandy, not madness, to which the greater part of his propensity for evil is attributable.'

'*Brandy?*' she gasped.

He raised his brows. 'Yes, I thought you had not been told the whole,' he said. 'I am sorry. I intended – and indeed ordered – otherwise.'

Miss Rochdale now realized that not her charge but her employer was mentally deranged. She rose to her feet, saying with a firmness which she hoped concealed her inward alarm: 'I think, sir, it would be best that I should present myself without further loss of time to Mrs Macclesfield.'

'To whom?' he asked, rather blankly.

'Your wife!' she said, retreating strategically towards the door.

He said with unruffled calm: 'I am not married.'

‘Not married?’ she cried. ‘Then – Have I been under a misapprehension? Are you not Mr Macclesfield?’

‘Certainly not,’ he replied. ‘I am Carlyon.’

He appeared to think that this statement was sufficient to apprise her of all she could possibly wish to know about him. She was wholly bewildered, and could only stammer: ‘I beg your pardon! I thought – But where, then, is Mrs Macclesfield?’

‘I do not think I know the lady.’

‘You do not know her! Is this not her house, sir?’

‘No,’ he said.

‘Oh, there has been some dreadful mistake!’ she cried distressfully. ‘I do not know how it can have come about! Indeed, I am very sorry, Mr Carlyon, but I think I am come to the wrong house!’

‘So it would appear, ma’am.’

‘It is the most mortifying circumstance! I do beg your pardon! But when the servant asked me if I was come in answer to the advertisement I thought – But I should have enquired more particularly!’

‘Did you come in answer to the advertisement?’ he interrupted, his brow creasing. ‘Not mine, I fancy!’

‘Oh, no! I was hired by Mrs Macclesfield to be governess to her children – more particularly, her little boy.’ In spite of herself, she began to laugh. ‘Oh, dear, could anything be more nonsensical? You may conceive what an effect your words had upon me!’

‘I imagine you must have supposed me to be mad.’

‘I did. But it is no laughing matter after all! Pray, where am I, sir?’

‘You are at Highnoons, ma’am. Where do you wish to be?’

‘Mrs Macclesfield’s residence is at Five Mile Ash,’ she answered. ‘I hope it may not be far removed from here?’

‘I am afraid it is quite sixteen or more miles to the east of this place,’ he responded. ‘You will hardly reach it tonight.’

‘Good God, sir, what in the world am I to do? I fear she will be much offended, and I am sure I do not know how to explain my folly to her!’

He did not seem to be attending very closely. He asked abruptly: 'Was there no other female got down from the stage at Billingshurst?'

'No, there was no one got down but myself,' she assured him.

'I suppose her courage deserted her,' he remarked. 'It is not surprising.'

'I collect that you too were expecting someone. It is indeed a chapter of accidents. I wish I knew how to contrive to be well out of such a fix!'

He favoured her with another of his measuring glances. 'Well, we may yet turn it to good account. Before you decide to present yourself at Five Mile Ash you might do worse than consider the post I have to offer.'

'You do not require a governess, sir!'

'No. I require a female – preferably a respectable female – who would be willing, upon terms, to marry a young relative of mine,' he replied.

She was for several moments deprived of all power of speech. Finding her tongue at last, she demanded: 'Are you in earnest?'

'Certainly.'

'I think you must indeed be mad!'

'I am not, but I daresay it may appear so.'

'To marry a young relative of yours!' she said scornfully. 'No doubt the gentleman whose evil propensities are attributable to brandy!'

'Precisely.'

'Mr Carlyon,' said Miss Rochdale roundly, 'I am in no mood for such trifling as this! Be as good as to –'

'I am not trifling with you, and I am not Mr Carlyon.'

'I beg your pardon! It is what you told me!'

'You have my name correctly, but it will be more proper for you to address me as Lord Carlyon.'

'Oh!' said Miss Rochdale. 'Well, that makes it no better, sir!'

'Makes what no better?'

'This – this preposterous and ill-timed jest of yours!'

'My proposal may be preposterous, but it is not a jest. There

are reasons why I am anxious to see my cousin married as soon as possible.'

'I do not pretend to understand you, my lord, but if that is so your cousin would be better advised to offer for some lady of his acquaintance.'

'Undoubtedly. But his character is too well known to make him acceptable to any female of his acquaintance. Nor has he any longer the recommendation of a respectable fortune.'

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Miss Rochdale, hardly knowing whether to laugh or to be indignant. 'And why, pray, should you suppose that this monster might be acceptable to me?'

'I don't suppose it,' he replied calmly. 'You may leave him at the church door, if you choose. In fact, I think you should do so.'

'Either I am dreaming,' said Miss Rochdale, maintaining her composure with a strong effort, 'or you are indeed mad!'

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He looked a little amused at this, but only replied with a shake of his head. Quite provoked by such conduct, Miss Rochdale said sharply: 'It does not signify talking! Be so good as to tell me how I may reach Five Mile Ash before it is too late to set out!'

He glanced at the bracket-clock on the mantelpiece, but as this had stopped, drew out his watch. 'It is already too late,' he said. 'It wants only ten minutes to nine.'

'Good God!' she exclaimed, turning quite pale. 'What am I to do?'

'Since I appear to have been in some sort responsible for your predicament you will do best to trust me to provide for you.'

'You are very obliging, my lord,' she retorted, 'but I prefer not to place my trust in one whose senses are clearly disordered!'

'Don't be foolish!' he replied, in much the same tone as she might herself have used in addressing a troublesome child. 'You know very well that my senses are not in the least disordered. You will do well to sit down again while I procure you some refreshment.'

His manner had the effect of soothing her exasperated nerves, and she could not but acknowledge that his offer of refreshment was welcome. She had not eaten since the morning. She went back to her chair, but said suspiciously: 'I do not know how you may mean to provide for me, for I am certainly not going to marry your cousin!'

'That is as you wish,' he returned, tugging at the bell-pull.

‘From what I have seen of your establishment,’ remarked Miss Rochdale waspishly, ‘that bell is very likely broken.’

‘More than probable,’ he agreed, walking towards the door. ‘But this is not my establishment.’

Miss Rochdale put a hand to her brow. ‘I begin to think my own senses are becoming disordered!’ she complained. ‘If this is neither your house nor Mrs Macclesfield’s, whose, pray, is it?’

‘My cousin’s.’

‘Your cousin’s! But I cannot remain here!’ she cried. ‘You cannot mean to keep me here, sir!’

‘Certainly not. It would be quite ineligible,’ he said, and left the room.

Wild ideas of precipitate flight crossed Miss Rochdale’s mind, but since she did not want for common sense, she rejected them. To be wandering about an unknown countryside all night would scarcely ameliorate her difficulties, and although her host’s behaviour might be extraordinary he did not appear to entertain any notion of constraining her against her will. She sat still therefore, and waited for him to reappear.

This he presently did, saying as he entered the room: ‘There seems to be nothing but cold meat in the house, but I have ordered them to do what they can.’

‘Some tea and bread-and-butter is all I require,’ she assured him.

‘It will be here directly.’

‘Thank you.’ She drew off her gloves, and folded them. ‘I have been wondering what to do for the best. Is there any carriage, or post-chaise, perhaps, which I might hire to convey me to Five Mile Ash, sir?’

‘As to that, I would convey you in my own carriage, but you will hardly endear yourself to your future employer by arriving at midnight.’

The truth of this observation most forcibly struck her. The image of the redoubtable Mrs Macclesfield rose before her mind’s eye, and almost caused her to shudder.

‘There is a decent inn at Wisborough Green where you may

put up for the night,' he said. 'In the morning, if you are determined to stick to your purpose, I will have you driven to Five Mile Ash.'

'I am very much obliged to you,' she faltered. 'But what shall I say to Mrs Macclesfield? The truth will not serve: she would think it fantastic!'

'It will certainly be awkward. You had better tell her that you mistook the day, and have but this instant arrived in Sussex.'

'I am much afraid that she will be justly angry, and perhaps turn me away.'

'In that case, you may return to me.'

'Yes! To be married to your odious cousin!' she said. 'I thank you, I am not yet reduced to such straits!'

'You are the best judge of that,' he replied imperturbably. 'I am naturally not very conversant with the duties a governess is expected to perform, but from all I have heard I should have supposed that almost anything would be preferable.'

There was so much truth in what he said that she was obliged to suppress a sigh. She said in a milder tone: 'Yes, but not marriage to a drunkard, I assure you.'

'He is not likely to live long,' he offered.

She began to feel a good deal of curiosity now that her alarm had been allayed, and looked an enquiry.

'His constitution has always been sickly,' he explained. 'If he does not meet his death through violence, which is by no means improbable, the brandy will soon finish him.'

'Oh!' said Miss Rochdale weakly. 'But why do you wish to see him married?'

'If he dies unmarried I must inherit his estate,' he answered.

She could only stare at him. Happily, since she was for the moment unable to find words to express her bewilderment, the servant came into the room just then, with a tray of tea, bread-and-butter, and cold meat, which he set down on the table beside her. He looked towards Carlyon, and said in a worried voice: 'Mr Eustace is not come in yet, my lord.'

'It is of no moment.'

‘If he is not in some scrape!’ the man murmured. ‘He went off in one of his quirks, my lord.’

Carlyon shrugged his disinterest. The servant sighed, and withdrew. Miss Rochdale, having drawn up her chair to the table, and poured out a cup of tea, addressed herself gratefully to the cold mutton, and began to feel more able to grapple with her circumstances. ‘I should not wish to appear vulgarly inquisitive, my lord,’ she said, ‘but did you say that you would inherit the estate if your cousin were to die unwed?’

‘I did.’

‘But don’t you wish to inherit it?’ she demanded.

‘Not at all.’

She recruited herself with a sip of tea. ‘It seems very odd!’ was all she could think of to say.

He came up to the table, and took a chair opposite her. ‘I dare say it may, but it is the truth. I should explain to you that I was for five unenviable years my cousin’s guardian.’ He paused, and she saw his lips tighten. After a moment, he continued in the same level voice: ‘His career at Eton came to an abrupt end, for which most of his paternal relatives held me to blame.’

‘Why, how could that be?’ she asked, surprised.

‘I have no idea. It was commonly said that if his father had not died during his infancy, or if my aunt had appointed one of her brothers-in-law to be his guardian in preference to myself, his disposition would have been wholly different.’

‘Well, to be sure, that seems very hard! But – pardon me! – was it not strange that you should have been chosen to be his guardian? You must have been very young!’

‘Your own age. I was six-and-twenty. It was natural enough. My aunt was my mother’s elder sister; she inherited this estate from my grandfather. My own estates lie within seven miles of it, and the intercourse between our two families had been constant. I had myself been fatherless for many years, a circumstance that perhaps made me older than my years. I found myself, at the age of eighteen, the head of a family whose youngest members were still in the nursery.’

‘Good heavens, do not tell me you were called upon to take charge of a family at that age!’ Miss Rochdale exclaimed.

He smiled. ‘No, not quite that. My mother was then living, but she did not enjoy good health, and it was natural that they should look to me.’

She regarded him wonderingly. ‘They?’

‘I have three brothers, and three sisters, ma’am.’

‘All in your charge!’

‘Oh, no! My sisters are now married; one of my brothers is on Sir Rowland Hill’s staff, in the Peninsula; another is secretary to Lord Sidmouth at the Home Office, and in general resides in London. You may say that I have only the youngest on my hands. He is in his first year at Oxford. But at the time of which I speak they were all at home.’ The smile again lit his eyes. ‘Your own experience must tell you, ma’am, that a family of six, ranging in age from infancy to sixteen years, is no light burden to cast upon a delicate female.’

‘No, indeed!’ she said feelingly. ‘But you had tutors – governesses?’

‘Yes, I lost count of them,’ he agreed. ‘Two of my brothers had the most ingenious ways of getting rid of their preceptors. But I do not know why I am boring on about my affairs, after all! I meant merely to explain how it was that my aunt came to leave her son to my care. I must confess that I most signally failed either to curb his inclination for all the more disastrous forms of dissipation, or to influence him in any way for the better. I only succeeded in giving him a profound dislike of me. I cannot blame him: his dislike of me can be nothing compared with the sentiments I have always cherished in regard to him.’ He looked across the table at her, and added with deliberation: ‘It is not an easy task to deal fairly with a youth for whom you can feel nothing but contempt and dislike, ma’am. One of my cousin’s uncles would tell you that I was always hard on him. It may have been so: I did not mean to be. When I was obliged to remove him from Eton, I put him in charge of an excellent tutor. It did not answer. A great noise was made over my refusal to entertain the notion of letting him go to

Oxford. There was, in fact, little likelihood of his proving himself eligible, but on every count I should have opposed it. I was held, however, to have acted from spite.'

'I wonder you should have listened to such ill-natured nonsense!' Miss Rochdale observed, quite hotly.

'I did not. After various vicissitudes, the boy took up a fancy to enter the Army. I thought if he could be removed from the society that was ruining him there might be some hope of his achieving respectability, so I bought him a pair of colours. I was instantly held to nourish designs on his inheritance, and to have chosen this way of putting a period to his existence. Happily for my reputation, he was asked to send in his papers before he had seen any active service. By that time he was of age, and my responsibility had come to an end.'

'I am astonished you should not have washed your hands of him!'

'To a great extent I did, but as his interpretation of our relationship included a belief that he was at liberty not only to pledge my credit, but to attach my signature to various bills, it was a trifle difficult to ignore him.'

She was very much shocked. 'And his paternal relatives blame you! Upon my word, it is too bad!'

'Yes, it becomes a little wearisome,' he acknowledged. 'I blame myself for having lent a certain amount of colour to their suspicions by once taking up a mortgage on part of the unencumbered land. I really meant it for the best, but I should have known better than to have done it. Were he to die now, and his property to come into my hands, it would be freely said in certain quarters that I had not only encouraged him to commit all the excesses that led to his end, but had, by some unspecified means, prevented him from marrying.'

'I own it is very disagreeable for you,' she said, 'but I am persuaded your own family, your friends, would not believe such slander!'

'By no means.'

'You should not allow yourself to regard it.'

‘No, perhaps I should not, if I had only myself to consider. But such whisperings can be extremely mischievous. My brother John, for instance, might find them embarrassing, and I have no desire to throw any rub, however unwitting, in his way. And Nicky – no, Nicky would never bear to hear me slandered!’ He broke off, as though recollecting that he was addressing a stranger, and said abruptly: ‘The simplest way to put a stop to all this nonsense is to provide my cousin with a wife, and that is what I am determined to do.’

‘But I do not properly understand, sir! If, as you say, your cousin dislikes you, why would he not himself look about him for a wife? He cannot wish you to inherit his possessions!’

‘Not at all. But not all the representations of his doctor have been enough to convince him that his life is not worth the purchase of a guinea. He considers that there is time and to spare before he need burden himself with a wife.’

‘If this is so, how have you been able to persuade him to be married to some unknown female whom, I collect, you have found for him through advertisement? It must be preposterous!’

‘I have said that I will meet his present debts if he does so.’

She regarded him with some shrewdness. ‘But he would be left with the burden of a wife on his hands. Or have you also undertaken to provide for this unfortunate female, sir?’

‘Of course,’ he said matter-of-factly. ‘There has been no suggestion on my part that the marriage should be more than a form. Indeed, I would ask no woman to live with my cousin.’

She wrinkled her brow, and said with a faint flush: ‘Can your purpose be achieved so? Forgive me, I think you cannot have considered, sir! To exclude you from the succession must there not be an heir?’

‘No, it is immaterial. The property is most foolishly left. My cousin inherited it from his and my grandfather, through his mother, but her marriage to Lionel Cheviot had so much displeased my grandfather that he was at pains to prevent its falling into his hands, or on to those of his family. With this aim, he settled it upon his grandson, with the proviso that if Eustace

died unmarried it must revert to his younger daughter, or her eldest son: myself, in fact.'

'It is entailed, I collect?'

'No, it is not an entail precisely. On the day Eustace marries he may dispose of the property as he wishes. It is an awkward arrangement, and I have often wondered what maggot can have entered my grandfather's head. He had some odd fancies, one of them being a strong persuasion that early marriages are beneficial to young men. That may have been in his mind when he made these provisions. I cannot tell.' He paused, and added calmly: 'You must acknowledge, ma'am, that my present scheme is not as fantastic as it may at first appear.'

She could not help smiling at this, but merely said: 'Will you find any female ready to lend herself to such a marriage? I must hold that to be in grave doubt.'

'On the contrary, I hope I may have done so,' he retorted.

She resolutely shook her head. 'No, my lord, you have not, if you have me in your mind. I could not entertain such a notion.'

'Why could you not?' he asked.

She blinked at him. '*Why* could I not?' she repeated.

'Yes, tell me!'

She found herself quite unable to comply with this request, although she was sure that she knew her own reasons. After struggling to put these into words, she sought refuge in evasion, and replied crossly: 'It must be perfectly plain why I could not!'

'Not to me.'

Apparently he was not to be so put off. Eyeing him with some resentment, Miss Rochdale said: 'You do not appear to me to want for sense!'

'No, nor am I so set up in my conceit that I cannot be convinced. I am waiting for you to do so.'

This very reasonable speech caused Miss Rochdale to feel a quite justifiable annoyance. She said coldly: 'I cannot undertake to do so. You may say, if you please, that I still have enough pride to recoil from such a contract.'

‘What I please to say cannot possibly signify,’ he replied patiently. ‘Is this all your reason?’

‘Yes – no! You must know that it is impossible to put into words what I feel! Every feeling must be offended!’

‘Are you betrothed?’ he asked.

‘No, I am not!’

‘You are perhaps in the expectation of becoming so?’

‘I have told you that I am six-and-twenty,’ snapped Miss Rochdale. ‘It is in the highest degree unlikely that I shall ever be betrothed!’

‘In that case,’ he returned prosaically, ‘you might do very much worse for yourself than to strike this bargain with me.’ He saw how her colour rose, and smiled with a good deal of understanding at her. ‘No, do not fly out upon me! Consider for a moment! You appear to be committed to a life of drudgery. I do not even know your name, but it is apparent to me – was apparent from the outset – that you were not born to the position you now occupy. If you are without the expectation of contracting an eligible alliance, what does the future hold for you? You must be too well aware of the evils of your situation to make it necessary for me to point these out to you. Marry my cousin: you must own that the advantages of such an alliance would outweigh the drawbacks which, I assure you, I perceive as clearly as you do yourself. His character is disgraceful, but he comes of a good family: as Mrs Cheviot, with an easy competence to call your own, you must command respect. You need do no more than take my cousin’s hand in church: I will engage for it that he shall not afterwards molest you. You may pass the rest of your life in comfort; you may even marry a second time, for I am in earnest when I say that my cousin cannot hope to continue long in his present way of life. Think soberly before you make me an answer!’

She heard him out in silence, meeting his steady regard at first, but presently lowering her eyes to the contemplation of her own hands, tightly clasped in her lap. It was impossible for her to listen to him unmoved. It was rarely that she had encountered a fellow-creature who understood any part of the ills of her

situation. Such casual acquaintances as she possessed seemed to think that the genteel nature of her chosen occupation must make it acceptable to her. But this strange, curt man, with his rather hard eyes and his almost blighting matter-of-factness, had called her life a drudgery. He had said it without a trace of sympathy in either face or voice, but he had said it, and only those who had endured such a life could know how true it was.

She hoped that she had too much delicacy of principle to allow the temptation she felt to overcome her scruples. That it was a temptation it would be useless to deny. Her future was indeed uncertain, and she was being offered, merely for giving her hand in nominal marriage, security, perhaps even the means of commanding again some of the elegancies of life. To remain steady in refusing must be a struggle; it was a minute or two before she could trust herself to look up. She tried to smile; it was a woeful attempt. She shook her head. 'I cannot. Do not press me further, I beg of you! My mind is made up.'

He bowed slightly. 'As you wish.'

'I think you must perceive that I could not do it, sir.'

'You have asked me not to press you further, and I shall not do so. You shall be conveyed to Five Mile Ash at whatever hour of the day you choose tomorrow.'

'You are very good,' she said gratefully. 'I wish Mrs Macclesfield may not turn me from her door! I am persuaded she would do so if she knew the truth!'

'You will have time to think of some acceptable explanation. Drink your tea! When you have done so, I will conduct you to the inn I spoke of, and arrange for your accommodation there.'

She thanked him meekly, and picked up her cup. She was relieved to find that he did not appear to be vexed, or even disappointed at her refusal to fall in with his schemes. She felt herself impelled to say: 'I am sorry to disoblige you, my lord.'

'I know of no reason why you should be expected to oblige me,' he answered. He took his snuff-box from his pocket, and opened it. 'You still have the advantage of me,' he remarked easily. 'May I know your name?'