

One

The Saloon, like every other room in Arnside House, was large and lofty, and had been furnished, possibly some twenty years earlier, in what had then been the first style of elegance. This, however, had become outmoded, and although the room bore no such signs of penury as a ragged carpet or patched curtains, the bright brocades had faded, the paint on the panelled walls had cracked, and the gilded picture-frames had long since become tarnished. To a casual visitor it might have seemed that Mr Penicuik, who owned the house, had fallen upon evil days; but two of the three gentlemen assembled in the Saloon at half-past six on a wintry evening of late February were in no danger of falling into this error. They knew that Great-uncle Matthew, who had made a fortune in the large enterprise of draining the Fen-country, was one of the warmest men in England, and suffered merely from a rooted dislike of spending money on anything that did not administer directly to his own comfort. The third gentleman gave no indication of thinking about it at all. He did not, like his cousin, Lord Biddenden, level a disapproving eyeglass at a spotted mirror; he did not, like his younger cousin, the Honourable and Reverend Hugh Rattray, comment acidly on the inadequacy of the small wood-fire burning in the hearth. Throughout dinner, which had been served at the unfashionable hour of five, and had been chosen (as Lord Biddenden pointed out to his brother) more with a regard to the host's digestive difficulties than to the tastes of his guests, he had maintained a silence that might have been

unbroken had his cousin Hugh not addressed a series of kind and simple remarks to him, which could be easily understood, and almost as easily answered. Upon entering the Saloon, he had drifted to a chair on one side of the fireplace, where he now sat, chewing a corner of his handkerchief, and staring with an expression of vacuity at his elder cousin. Lord Biddenden knew that this gaze betokened nothing but blankness of mind, but he found it disconcerting, and muttered fretfully: 'I wish the silly fellow would not stare so!'

'He is doing you no harm,' his brother said gravely. However, he picked up a book of engravings from one of the tables, and gave it to Lord Dolphinton, directing him to look at the pictures, and telling him that he would find them very pretty and interesting. Lord Dolphinton, who was accustomed to being told, far less kindly, by his mother, what he must do, received the book gratefully, and began to turn over the pages.

Lord Biddenden said, still in that complaining under-voice: 'I cannot conceive what should have prevailed with Uncle Matthew to have invited him! It is absurd to suppose that *he* can have an interest in this business!' He received no other answer than one of his brother's annoyingly reproving looks, and with an exclamation of impatience walked over to the table, and began to toss over one or two periodicals which had been arranged upon it. 'It is excessively provoking that Claud should not be here!' he said, for perhaps the seventh time that day. 'I should have been very glad to have seen him comfortably established!' This observation being met with the same unencouraging silence, his lordship said with a good deal of asperity: '*You* may not consider Claud's claims, but *I* am not one to be forgetting my brothers, I am thankful to state! I'll tell you what it is, Hugh: you are a cold-hearted fellow, and if you depend upon your countenance to win you a handsome fortune, you may well be disappointed, and there will all my trouble be spent for nothing!'

'What trouble?' enquired the Rector, in accents which lent some colour to his brother's accusation.

‘If it had not been for my representations of what you owe to the family, you would not be here this evening!’

The Reverend Hugh shrugged his broad shoulders, and replied repressively: ‘The whole of the affair seems to me to be most improper. If I make poor Kitty an offer, it will be from compassion, and in the belief that her upbringing and character are such as must make her a suitable wife for a man in orders.’

‘Humbug!’ retorted Lord Biddenden. ‘If Uncle Matthew makes the girl his heiress, she will inherit, I daresay, as much as twenty thousand pounds a year! He cannot have spent a tithe of his fortune since he built this place, and when one considers how it must have accumulated – My dear Hugh, I do beg of you to use a little address! If I were a single man – ! But, there! It does not do to be repining, and I am sure I am not the man to be grudging a fortune to either of my brothers!’

‘We have been at Arnside close upon twenty-four hours,’ said Hugh, ‘and my great-uncle has not yet made known to us his intentions.’

‘We know very well what they are,’ replied Lord Biddenden irritably. ‘And if you do not guess why he has not yet spoken, you are a bigger fool than I take you for! Of course he hoped that Jack would come to Arnside! And Freddy, too,’ he added perfunctorily. ‘Not that Freddy signifies a whit more than Dolphinton here, but I daresay the old man would wish him not to be excluded. No, no, it is Jack’s absence which has made him hold his tongue! And I must say, Hugh, I never looked for that, and must hold it to be a piece of astonishing good fortune! Depend upon it, had the opportunity offered, the girl must have chosen him!’

‘I do not know why you should say so,’ replied the Rector stiffly. ‘Indeed, I am at a loss of understand why you should be so anxious to have me offer for a lady whom you apparently hold in such poor esteem! If I did not believe her to be a well-brought-up young woman to whom such persons as my cousin Jack must be repugnant –’

‘Yes, well, that is more of your humbug!’ interrupted his

lordship. 'You may be a handsome fellow, Hugh, but you are not an out-and-outer, like Jack!'

'I have no wish to be an out-and-outer, as you term it,' said Hugh, more stiffly still. 'Nor do I regard his absence or his presence as being of any particular consequence.'

'Oh, don't sham it so!' exclaimed Biddenden, flinging down a copy of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. 'If you fancy, my dear brother, that because he gave you your living my uncle prefers you above his other great-nephews you very much mistake the matter! I wonder you will talk such gammon, I do, indeed! Jack has always been my uncle's favourite, and so you know! He means Kitty to choose him, depend upon it, and that is why he is so devilish out of humour! I marvel at his having invited any of the rest of us, upon my soul I do!'

Lord Dolphinton, who occasionally disconcerted his relations by attending to what they said, here raised his eyes from the book on his knees, and interpolated: 'Uncle said he didn't invite you, George. Said he didn't know why you came. Said —'

'Nonsense! You know nothing of the matter!' said Lord Biddenden.

Lord Dolphinton's understanding was not powerful, nor was it one which readily assimilated ideas; but once it had received an impression it was tenacious. 'Did say so!' he insisted. 'Said it last night, when you arrived. Said it again this morning. Said it —'

'Very well, that will do!' said his cousin testily.

Lord Dolphinton was not to be so easily silenced. 'Said it when we sat down to luncheon,' he continued, ticking the occasion off on one bony finger. 'Said it at dinner. Said if you didn't care for your mutton you needn't have come, because he didn't invite you. I ain't clever, like you fellows, but when people say things to me once or twice I can remember them.' He observed that this simple declaration of his powers had bereft his cousin of words, and retired again, mildly pleased, into his book.

Lord Biddenden exchanged a speaking look with his brother; but Hugh merely remarked that it was very true, and that in such a contemptuous voice that Biddenden was goaded into saying:

‘Well, at all events, it is as much to the purpose that I have come as that Dolphinton has! Folly!’

‘I’m an Earl,’ said Lord Dolphinton, suddenly re-entering the conversation. ‘*You* ain’t an Earl. Hugh ain’t an Earl. Freddy ain’t—’

‘No, you are the only Earl amongst us,’ interposed Hugh soothingly.

‘George is only a Baron,’ said Dolphinton.

Lord Biddenden cast him a glance of dislike, and said something under his breath about impoverished Irish peers. He had less patience with Dolphinton than any of the cousins, and the remark, moreover, had slightly wounded his sensibilities. He was a man of more pride than genius; liked to think himself the head of a family of great consequence; and was ambitious to improve his condition. However poorly he might think of Irish titles, he could never see Dolphinton without suffering a pang. A juster providence, he felt, must have reversed their positions. Not that he wished to exchange more with Dolphinton than his title: certainly not his snug inheritance for Dolphinton’s Irish acres, mortgaged to the hilt, as he had good reason to suppose they were. Dolphinton was an only child, too, and that would not have suited his cousin. Lord Biddenden’s instincts were patriarchal. He liked to see his brothers and sisters under his roof, and to feel that they depended upon him for guidance; and he was almost as anxious for their advancement as his own. It had been a source of considerable chagrin to him that circumstances had made it impossible for him to bestow his first living upon Hugh. He, and not Matthew Penicuik, should have been Hugh’s benefactor, and he could never quite forgive the valetudinarian who was nursing Hugh’s Rectory for having grossly outlived expectation. That Hugh’s presence within walking distance of Biddenden Manor might not be conducive either to his happiness or to his self-esteem he did not allow to weigh with him, for he was a man with a strong sense of propriety, and he knew that it was his duty to feel affection for all his brothers and sisters. But the melancholy truth was that he could never be long

in company with Hugh without becoming vexed with him. He was a just man, and he did not blame Hugh for being a head taller than himself, and very much slimmer; but he did think that Hugh was to be blamed for supposing that his cloth gave him the right to adopt a censorious attitude towards his elders. Regretfully, Lord Biddenden thought of his second brother, Claud, and wished that he were not, at this particular moment, serving with his regiment in the Army of Occupation in France. He would have been glad to have helped Claud to a fortune, for he liked him, and he foresaw, too, that he would be obliged, at no very distant date, to help him to buy his promotion, if not to do the thing outright. Captain Rattray, though deferential to the head of his house, was expensive.

These reflections were disturbed by Lord Dolphinton, who raised his head again, and gave utterance to the thought which had been slowly germinating in his brain. 'I'd as lief not be an Earl,' he said heavily. 'Or a Viscount. Freddy's going to be a Viscount. I wouldn't wish to be. I wouldn't wish to be a Baron, though that's not much. George —'

'Yes, yes, we all know I am a Baron! You need not enumerate the degrees of nobility!' said Biddenden, in an exasperated tone. 'You had as lief not be a peer of any degree! I am sure I don't know what maggot has got into your head now, but that at least I have understood!'

'There is no occasion for you to speak so roughly,' said Hugh. 'What *would* you like to be, Foster?'

Lord Dolphinton sighed. 'That's just it,' he said mournfully. 'I wouldn't like to be a military man. Or a parson. Or a doctor. Or —'

The Rector, realizing that the list of the occupations his cousin did not desire to engage in was likely to be a long one, intervened, saying in his grave way: 'Why don't you wish to be an Earl, Foster?'

'I just don't,' said Dolphinton simply.

Fortunately, since his elder cousin showed signs of becoming apoplectic, any further remarks which he might have felt

impelled to make were checked by the arrival on the scene of his great-uncle and host.

Mr Penicuik, who had retired to his bedchamber after dinner for the purpose of having all the bandages which were bound round a gouty foot removed and replaced, made an impressive entrance. His butler preceded him, bearing upon a silver salver a box of pills, and a glass half-filled with an evil-looking mixture; Mr Penicuik himself hobbled in supported on one side by a stalwart footman, and upon the other by his valet; and a maid-servant brought up the rear, carrying a heavy walking-stick, several cushions, and a shawl. Both Lord Biddenden and his brother started helpfully towards their infirm relative, and were cursed for their pains. The butler informed Lord Dolphinton in a reproachful whisper that he was occupying the Master's chair. Much alarmed, Dolphinton removed himself to an uncomfortable seat at some distance from the fire. Mr Penicuik, uttering sundry groans, adjurations, and objugations, was lowered into his favourite chair, his gouty foot was laid tenderly upon a cushion, placed on the stool before him, another cushion was set at his back, and his nephew Hugh disposed the shawl about his shoulders, rather unwisely enquiring, as he did so, if he was comfortable.

'No, I'm not comfortable, and if you had my stomach, and my gout, you wouldn't ask me a damned silly question like that!' retorted Mr Penicuik. 'Stobhill, where's my cordial? Where are my pills? They don't do me any good, but I've paid for them, and I won't have waste! Where's my stick? Put it where I can reach it, girl, and don't stand there with your mouth at half-cock! Pack of fools! Don't keep on hovering round me, Spiddle! I can't abide hoverers! And don't go out of hearing of the bell, for very likely I shall go to bed early, and I don't want to be kept waiting while you're searched for all over. Go away, all of you! No, wait! Where's my snuff-box?'

'I fancy, sir, that you placed it in your pocket upon rising from the dinner-table,' said Stobhill apologetically.

'More fool you to have let me sit down before I took it out

again!’ said Mr Penicuik, making heroic efforts to get a hand to his pocket, and uttering another anguished groan. An offer of Lord Biddenden’s Special Sort, put up in an elegant enamel box, was ungratefully rejected. Mr Penicuik said that he had used Nut Brown for years, and wanted nobody’s new-fangled mixture. He succeeded, with assistance from two of his henchmen, in extricating his box from his pocket, said that the room was as cold as a tomb, and roundly denounced the footman for not having built up a better fire. The footman, who was new to his service, foolishly reminded Mr Penicuik that he had himself given orders to make only a small fire in the Saloon. ‘Man’s an idiot!’ said Mr Penicuik. ‘Small fire be damned! Not when I’m going to sit here myself, clodpole!’ He waved the servants away, and nodded to his young relatives. ‘In general, I don’t sit here,’ he informed them. ‘Never sit anywhere but in the library, but I didn’t want the pack of you crowding in there.’ He then glanced round the room, observed that it needed refurbishing but that he was not going to squander his money on a room he might not enter again for a twelvemonth, and swallowed two pills and the cordial. After this, he took a generous pinch of snuff, which seemed to refresh him, and said: ‘Well, I told you all to come here for a purpose, and if some of you don’t choose to do what’s to their interest I wash my hands of them. I’ve given ’em a day’s grace, and there’s an end to it! I won’t keep you all here, eating me out of house and home, to suit the convenience of a couple of damned jackanapes. Mind, I don’t mean they shan’t have their chance! They don’t deserve it, but I said Kitty should have her pick, and I’m a man of my word.’

‘I apprehend, sir,’ said Biddenden, ‘that we have some inkling of your intentions. You will recall that *one* amongst us is absent through no fault of his own.’

‘If you’re talking about your brother Claud, I’m glad he isn’t here,’ replied Mr Penicuik. ‘I’ve nothing against the boy, but I can’t abide military men. He can make Kitty an offer if he chooses, but I can tell you now she’ll have nothing to say to him. Why should she? Hasn’t clapped eyes on him for years! Now,

you may all of you keep quiet, and listen to what I have to say. I've been thinking about it for a long time, and I've decided what's the right thing for me to do, so now I'll put it to you in plain terms. Dolphinton, do you understand me?'

Lord Dolphinton, who was sitting with his hands loosely clasped between his knees, and an expression on his face of the utmost dejection, started, and nodded.

'I don't suppose he does,' Mr Penicuik told Hugh, in a lowered voice. 'His mother may say what she pleases, but *I've* always thought he was touched in his upper works! However, he's as much my great-nevvy as any of you, and I settled it with myself that I'd make no distinctions between you.' He paused, and looked at the assembled company with all the satisfaction of one about to address an audience without fear of argument or interruption. 'It's about my Will,' he said. 'I'm an old man now, and I daresay I shan't live for very much longer. Not that I care for that, for I've had my day, and I don't doubt you'll all be glad to see me into my coffin.' Here he paused again, and with the shaking hand of advanced senility helped himself to another pinch of snuff. This performance, however, awoke little response in his great-nephews. Both Dolphinton and the Reverend Hugh certainly had their eyes fixed upon him, but Dolphinton's gaze could not be described as anything but lack-lustre, and Hugh's was frankly sceptical. Biddenden was engaged in polishing his eyeglass. Mr Penicuik was not, in fact, so laden with years as his wizened appearance and his conversation might have led the uninitiated to suppose. He was, indeed, the last representative of his generation, as he was fond of informing his visitors; but as four sisters had preceded him into the world and out of it this was not such an impressive circumstance as he would have wished it to appear. 'I'm the last of my name,' he said, sadly shaking his head. 'Outlived my generation! Never married; never had a brother!'

These tragic accents had their effect upon Lord Dolphinton. He turned his apprehensive eyes towards Hugh. Hugh smiled at him, in a reassuring way, and said in a colourless voice: 'Precisely so, sir!'

Mr Penicuik, finding his audience to be unresponsive, abandoned his pathetic manner, and said with his customary tartness: 'Not that I shed many tears when my sisters died, for I didn't! I will say this for your grandmother, you two! – She didn't trouble me much! But Dolphinton's grandmother – she was my sister Cornelia, and the stupidest female – well, never mind that! Rosie was the best of 'em. Damme, I *liked* Rosie, and I like Jack! Spit and image of her! I don't know why the rascal ain't here tonight!' This recollection brought the querulous note back into his voice. He sat in silence for a moment or two, brooding over his favourite great-nephew's defection. Biddenden directed a look of long-suffering at his brother, but Hugh sat with his eyes on Mr Penicuik's face, courteously waiting for him to resume his discourse. 'Well, it don't signify!' Mr Penicuik said snappishly. 'What I'm going to say is this: there's no reason why I shouldn't leave my money where I choose! You've none of you got a ha'porth of claim to it, so don't think it! At the same time, I was never one to forget my own kith and kin. No one can say I haven't done my duty by the family. Why, when I think of the times I've let you all come down here – nasty, destructive boys you were, too! – besides giving Dolphinton's mother, who's no niece of mine, a lot of advice she'd have done well to have listened to, when my nevvv Dolphinton died – well, there it is! I've got a feeling for my own blood there's no explaining. George has it too: it's the only thing I like about you, George. So it seemed to me that my money ought to go to one of you. At the same time, there's Kitty, and I'm not going to deny that I'd like her to have it, and if I hadn't a sense of what's due to the family I'd leave it to her, and make no more ado about it!' He glanced from Biddenden to Hugh, and gave a sudden cackle of mirth. 'I daresay you've often asked yourselves if she wasn't my daughter, hey? Well, she ain't! No relation of mine at all. She was poor Tom Charing's child, all right and tight, whatever you may have suspected. She's the last of the Charings, more's the pity. Tom and I were lads together, but his father left him pretty well in the basket, and mine left me plump enough in the pocket. Tom died

before Kitty was out of leading-strings, and there weren't any Charings left, beyond a couple of sour old cousins, so I adopted the girl. Nothing havey-cavey about the business at all, and no reason why she shouldn't marry into any family she chooses. So I've settled it that one of you shall have her, and my fortune into the bargain.'

'I must say, sir, it is an odd, whimsical notion!' Biddenden remarked. 'And one which —'

'Whimsical!' exclaimed Hugh, in tones of disgust. 'I had rather have called it outrageous!'

'Very well, my lad, if that's what you think, don't offer for her!' retorted Mr Penicuik.

'Pray be silent, Hugh! May I enquire, sir, whether the whole of your estate is to be bequeathed to the — er — fortunate suitor?'

'To Kitty, once she safely married. I don't hold with cutting up property.'

'And in the event of no offer's being received?'

Mr Penicuik gave vent to another of his cackles. 'I ain't afraid of that!'

Hugh rose to his feet, and stood towering above his great-uncle. 'I will not be silenced! The whole of this scheme must be repugnant to any female of delicacy. Pray, which of us do you mean to compel her to marry?'

'Don't stand there, giving me a crick in my neck!' said Mr Penicuik. 'I shan't compel her to marry any of you. I don't say I wouldn't rather she had one than another, naming no names, but I'm not an unreasonable man, and I'm willing to let her have her pick amongst you. Plenty of you to choose from!'

'But what if she should refuse, sir?' asked Biddenden anxiously.

'Then I'll leave my money to the Foundling Hospital, or some such thing!' replied Mr Penicuik. 'She won't be such a zany!'

'Am I correct in assuming, sir, that Kitty has no fortune of her own?' demanded Hugh.

'Not a farthing piece,' said Mr Penicuik cheerfully.

Hugh's eyes flashed. 'And you say you do not compel her! I

marvel at you, sir! I may say that I am profoundly shocked! Without fortune, what hope can any female, circumstanced as Kitty is, have of achieving a respectable alliance?’

‘She can’t have any, of course,’ said Mr Penicuik becoming momentarily more affable as his great-nephew’s choler rose.

‘No, indeed!’ exclaimed Lord Biddenden, almost shuddering at the thought of marriage with a portionless female. ‘Really, Hugh, you go too far! I don’t know where you learned your fantastic notions! One would say there had never been a marriage arranged before, yet you must be well aware that in our circle such things are always done! Your own sisters –’

‘I have yet to learn that my sisters were forced into marriages that were distasteful to them!’

Mr Penicuik opened his snuff-box again. ‘What makes you think marriage to one of you would be distasteful to the girl?’ he asked blandly. ‘Maybe she don’t fancy *you*, but that ain’t to say there isn’t one amongst you she might not be glad to pick. She don’t know any other men, so there’s bound to be.’ Inhaling too large a pinch of Nut Brown, he sneezed violently several times. When he had recovered from this seizure, he said: ‘Going to be open with you! Everyone knows the Charings: good stock, fit to couple with any family! The thing is, Kitty has French blood in her.’ This information was well known to the company, but he disclosed it with all the air of one making a damaging admission. ‘Evron was the name. Never knew much about the family myself. They were emigrés, but not noble – at least, if they were it’s more than Tom ever told me. They won’t trouble you: *I* saw to that! Fellow who said he was Kitty’s uncle came here once – oh, years ago! Brought his sons with him: couple of scrubby schoolboys, *they* were. I soon sent him to the rightabout: a very neat article I thought him! No use his trying to bamboozle me, and so I told him! A sponge, that’s what he was, if he wasn’t worse. However, to the best of my belief he took himself off to France again. I never heard any more of him, at all events. But Désirée – Kitty’s mother –’ He broke off, and his gaze, which had been flickering from Biddenden’s face to the Reverend

Hugh's, transferred itself to the smouldering logs in the grate. He did not finish his sentence, but said, after a pause: 'Pretty little thing, Kitty, but she'll never be the equal of her mother. Favours poor Tom too much. Got something of her mother's look: I see it now and then: but Dés – Mrs Charing – Well, never mind! That ain't to the purpose.' He stretched out his hand towards the bell-rope, and pulled it vigorously. 'I'll have her in,' he said. 'But, mind, now! *I* ain't compelling her to choose any of you three – well, she can't choose you, George, because you're married already! I don't know what brings you here: *I* never invited you!'

Lord Dolphinton, pleased to hear his words thus confirmed, turned his eyes towards his elder cousin, and remarked succinctly: 'Told you so!'

Two

A few minutes later, Miss Catherine Charing entered the room, accompanied by an elderly lady whose sparse gray locks had been crimped into ringlets which dangled on either side of an amiable if not comely countenance. The absence of a cap proclaimed her spinsterhood; she wore a high-gown of an unbecoming shade of puce; and carried a reticule in one bony hand. Mr Penicuik no sooner saw her than he exclaimed with unnecessary violence: ‘Not you, woman, not you! Think I haven’t had a bellyful of your face today? Go away! go away!’

The elderly lady made a faint clucking noise, but although she looked frightened she did not seem to be surprised by this unconventional greeting. She said: ‘Oh, Mr Penicuik! At such a time – such a *delicate* occasion – !’

‘Kitty!’ interrupted Mr Penicuik. ‘Throw that Fish out of the room!’

The elderly lady uttered a protesting shriek; Miss Charing, however, pushed her gently but inexorably over the threshold, saying: ‘I *told* you how it would be!’ She then closed the door, favoured the company with a wide-eyed and thoughtful gaze, and advanced into the middle of the room.

‘Good girl!’ approved Mr Penicuik. ‘Sit down!’

‘Take this chair!’ urged Lord Biddenden.

‘You will be comfortable here, my dear Kitty,’ said the Reverend Hugh, indicating the chair from which he had risen at her entrance.

Not to be outdone, Lord Dolphinton gulped, and said: 'Take mine! Not comfortable, but very happy to – Pray take it!'

Miss Charing bestowed a small, prim smile upon her suitors, and sat down on a straight chair by the table, and folded her hands in her lap.

Miss Charing was a rather diminutive brunette. She had a neat figure, very pretty hands and feet, and a countenance which owed much to a pair of large, dark eyes. Their expression was one of candour and of innocence, and she had a habit of fixing them earnestly (and sometimes disconcertingly) upon the face of any interlocutor. She had a slightly retroussé nose, a short upper-lip, a decided chin, and a profusion of dusky curls, which were dressed in the demure style which found favour in the eyes of her guardian and her governess. She wore a round robe of green cambric, with a high waist and long sleeves, and one narrow flounce. A small gold locket was suspended round her throat by a ribbon. It was her only ornament. If Lord Biddenden, a man of fashionable inclinations, felt that a few trinkets and a more modish gown would have improved her, it was plain that his brother surveyed her modest appearance with approbation.

'Well, Kitty,' said Mr Penicuik, 'I've told these three what my intentions are, and now they may speak for themselves. Not Biddenden, of course: I don't mean *him*, though I don't doubt he'd speak fast enough if he could. What brought him here I don't know!'

'I expect,' said Miss Charing, considering his lordship, 'he came to bring Hugh up to the mark.'

'Really, Kitty! Upon my word!' ejaculated Biddenden, visibly discomposed. 'It is time you learned to mend your tongue!'

Miss Charing looked surprised, and directed an enquiring glance at Hugh. He said, with grave kindness: 'George means that such expressions as *up to the mark* are improper when uttered by a female, cousin.'

'Ho!' said Mr Penicuik. 'So that's what he meant, is it? Well, well! Then I'll thank him to keep his nose out of what don't concern him! What's more, I won't have you teaching the girl to

be mealy-mouthed! Not while she lives under my roof! I have quite enough of that from that Fish!

‘I must observe, sir, that my cousin would be perhaps well-advised to model her conversation rather upon Miss Fishguard’s example than upon that set her by – I conjecture – Jack,’ returned Hugh, pointedly enunciating each syllable of the governess’s name.

‘Gammon!’ said Mr Penicuik rudely. ‘It ain’t Jack’s example she follows! It’s mine! I knew how it would be: I shan’t get a wink of sleep tonight! Damme, I never knew a fellow turn my bile as you do, Hugh, with that starched face of yours, and your prosy ways! If I hadn’t made up my mind to it that – Never mind that! I did make it up, and I won’t go back on my word! Never have, never will! However, there’s no reason for Kitty to be in a hurry to decide which of you she’ll have, and if she takes my advice she’ll wait and see whether – Not that either of ’em deserves she should, and if they think they can keep *me* dangling on their whims they will very soon discover their mistake!’

With these suddenly venomous words Mr Penicuik once more tugged at the bell-rope, and with such violence that it was not surprising that not only the butler, but his valet as well, appeared in the Saloon before the echo of the clapper had died away. Mr Penicuik announced his determination to retire to the library, adding that he had had enough of his relations for one day, but would see them again upon the morrow, unless – as was more than probable – he was then too ill to see anyone but the doctor. ‘Not that it’ll do me any good to see *him!*’ he said. He uttered a sharp yelp as he was hoisted out of his chair, cursed his valet, and cast a malevolent look at Lord Biddenden. ‘And if I were to sleep all night, and wake up without a twinge of this damned gout, I still wouldn’t want to see you, George!’ he declared.

Lord Biddenden waited until he had been supported out of the room before observing, with a significant look: ‘It is not difficult to understand what has cast him into this ill-humour, of course!’

‘Didn’t invite you,’ said Dolphinton, showing his understanding.

‘Oh, hold your tongue!’ exclaimed Biddenden, quite exasperated. ‘My uncle must be in his dotage! A more ill-managed business —’

‘Ill-managed indeed,’ said Hugh. ‘There has been a want of delicacy which must be excessively disagreeable, not to *you*, but to our cousin here!’

‘She is not our cousin!’

‘My dear brother, we have thought of her as our cousin ever since she was in her cradle.’

‘Yes, I know we have,’ said Biddenden, ‘but you heard what my uncle said! She’s not!’

Hugh said arctically: ‘That was not what I meant. I am happy to be able to say that such a suspicion has never crossed my mind.’

‘Coming it rather too strong, Hugh,’ said Biddenden, with a short laugh.

‘You forget your company!’ said Hugh, allowing annoyance to lend an edge to his voice.

Recollecting it, Lord Biddenden reddened, and cast an apologetic look at Kitty. ‘I beg your pardon! But this business has so much provoked me — ! Done in such a scrambling way — ! However, I do not mean to put you to the blush, and I am sure we have all of us been in such habits of easy intercourse that there is no reason why you should feel the least degree of mortification!’

‘Oh, no, I don’t!’ Kitty assured him. ‘In fact, it is a thing I have wondered about very often, only Hugh told me he was persuaded it could be no such thing. Which, I must own, I was very glad of.’

‘Well, upon my word!’ said Lord Biddenden, torn between diversion and disapproval. ‘Hugh told you, did he? So much for your fine talking, my dear brother! No suspicion, indeed! I wonder you will be for ever trying to humbug us all! You should not be talking of such things to Hugh, my dear Kitty, but I shall say nothing further on that head! No doubt you have a comfortable understanding with him, and I am sure I am glad to know that this is so!’

‘Well, I knew it would be useless to ask poor Fish,’ said Kitty naïvely, ‘so I spoke to Hugh, because he is a clergyman. Has Uncle Matthew told you that I am *not* his daughter?’

She turned her eyes towards Hugh as she spoke, and he replied, a little repressively: ‘You are the daughter of the late Thomas Charing, Kitty, and of his wife, a French lady.’

‘Oh, I knew my mother was French!’ said Kitty. ‘I remember when my Uncle Armand brought my French cousins to see us. Their names were Camille and André, and Camille mended my doll for me, which no one else was able to do, after Claud said she was an *aristo*, and cut her head off.’ Miss Charing’s eyes darkened with memory; she added in a brooding tone: ‘For which I shall *never* forgive him!’

This speech did not seem to augur well for the absent Captain Rattray’s chances of winning an heiress. Lord Biddenden said fretfully: ‘My dear Kitty, that must have been years ago!’

‘Yes, but I have *not* forgotten, and I shall *always* be grateful to my cousin Camille.’

‘Ridiculous!’

Hugh interposed, saying: ‘It is you who are ridiculous, George. However, I must agree with you that my uncle has shown a lack of delicacy in this affair which renders the present situation distasteful to any person of refinement. I am persuaded that it would be more agreeable to our cousin if you and Dolphinton were to withdraw into some other apartment.’

‘I daresay it would be more agreeable to *you*,’ retorted his lordship, ‘and I should be very glad to oblige you, but if you imagine that I am going to bed at seven o’clock you are the more mistaken!’

‘There is not the smallest necessity for you to go to bed. Really, George –!’

‘Oh, yes, there is!’ said his lordship, with considerable acerbity. ‘No doubt my uncle has a very comfortable fire built up in the library, but if there is one in any other room in the house I have yet to discover it!’

‘Well, there is one in his bedchamber, of course,’ said Kitty.

‘And, if you did not object to sitting with Fish, there is a fire in the schoolroom. Only I daresay you would not like it very much.’

‘No, I should not!’

‘And poor Dolph wouldn’t like it either. Besides, he wants to say something,’ pursued Kitty, who had been observing with an indulgent eye the spasmodic opening and shutting of Lord Dolphinton’s large mouth.

‘Well, Foster, what is it?’ said Hugh encouragingly.

‘I won’t go with George!’ announced Dolphinton. ‘I don’t like George. Didn’t come to see him. Oughtn’t to be here. Wasn’t invited!’

‘Oh, my God, now we are back at that!’ muttered Biddenden. ‘You might just as well take yourself off to bed, Dolphinton, as remain here!’

‘No, I might not,’ returned Dolphinton, with spirit. ‘I ain’t a married man! What’s more, I’m an Earl.’

‘What has that to say to anything, pray? I wish you will –’

‘Important,’ said Dolphinton. ‘Good thing to marry an Earl. Be a Countess.’

‘This, I collect, is a declaration!’ said Biddenden sardonically. ‘Pretty well, Foster, I must say!’

‘Are you being so obliging as to make me an offer, Dolph?’ enquired Miss Charing, in no way discomposed.

Lord Dolphinton nodded several times, grateful to her for her ready understanding. ‘Very happy to oblige!’ he said. ‘Not at all plump in the pocket – no, not to mention that! Just say – always had a great regard for you! Do me the honour to accept of my hand in marriage!’

‘Upon my word!’ ejaculated Biddenden. ‘If one did not know the truth, one would say you were three parts disguised, Foster!’

Lord Dolphinton, uneasily aware of having lost the thread of a prepared speech, looked more miserable than ever, and coloured to the roots of his lank brown locks. He cast an imploring glance at Miss Charing, who at once rose, and went to seat herself in a chair beside him, patting his hand in a soothing way, and saying: ‘Nonsense! You said it very creditably, Dolph,

and I perfectly understand how it is! You have offered for me because your Mama ordered you to do so, haven't you?"

"That's it," said his lordship, relieved. "No wish to vex you, Kitty – really very fond of you! – but must make a push!"

"Exactly so! Your estates are shockingly mortgaged, and your pockets are quite to let, so you have offered for me! But you don't really wish to marry me, do you?"

His lordship sighed. "No help for it!" he said simply.

"Yes, there is, because I won't accept your offer, Dolph," said Miss Charing, in a consoling tone. "So now you may be comfortable again!"

The cloud lifted from his brow, only to descend again. "No, I shan't," said his lordship wretchedly. "She'll take a pet. Say I must have made poor work of it."

"What astonishes me," said Biddenden, in an aside to his brother, "is that my Aunt Augusta permitted him to come here without her!"

"Didn't want to," said Dolphinton, once more startling his relatives by his ability to follow the gist of remarks not addressed to himself. "Uncle Matthew said he wouldn't let her cross his threshold. Said I must come alone. *I* didn't object, only she'll say I didn't do the thing as she told me. Well, I did! Offered for you – said I was an Earl – said I should be honoured! Won't believe it, that's all!"

"Oh, don't distress yourself!" said Biddenden. "We three are witnesses to testify to your having expressed yourself with all the ardour and address imaginable!"

"You think I did?" said Dolphinton hopefully.

"Oh, heaven grant me patience!" exclaimed his cousin.

"Indeed, you stand in need of it!" said Hugh sternly. "You may be quite easy, my dear Foster: you have done just as my aunt bade you. I believe I may say that no persuasions of her could have prevailed upon our cousin to have changed her nay to yea."

"Well, you may," conceded Miss Charing. "Only I am very well able to speak for myself, I thank you, Hugh! Are *you* wishful of making me an offer?"

Lord Dolphinton, his mission honourably discharged, turned an interested gaze upon his clerical cousin; Lord Biddenden exclaimed: 'This is intolerable!' and Hugh himself looked a trifle out of countenance. He hesitated, before saying, with a constrained smile: 'There is a degree of awkwardness attached to the situation which might, I fancy, be more easily overcome were we to converse alone together.'

'Yes, but you cannot expect George and poor Dolph to remove to a room where there is no fire!' objected Miss Charing reasonably. 'It would be useless to apply to Uncle Matthew for leave to kindle any more fires tonight: you must know that! Nothing puts him into such a taking as habits of wasteful extravagance, and he would be bound to think it a great waste of coals to make a fire for George or for Dolph. And as for our situation's being awkward, if I do not regard that I am sure you need not. In fact, I am happy to be able to tell as many of you as I can that I have not the smallest wish to marry *any* of you!'

'Very likely you have not, Kitty, but that you should express yourself with such heat – or, I may say, *at all!* – is very unbecoming in you. I am astonished that Miss Fishguard – an excellent woman, I am sure! – should not have taught you a little more conduct!' It occurred to Lord Biddenden that a quarrel with Kitty would scarcely forward the project he had in view, and he added, in a more cordial tone: 'But, indeed, I must own that such a situation as this must be considered in itself to have passed the bounds of propriety! Believe me, Kitty, I feel for you! You have been made the object of what I cannot but deem a distempered freak.'

'Yes, but fortunately I am very well acquainted with you all, so that I need have no scruple in speaking the truth to you,' Kitty pointed out. 'I don't want Uncle Matthew's odious fortune, and as for marrying any gentleman who offered for me only because I have the advantage of a handsome dependance, I would rather wear the willow all my days! And let me tell you, Hugh, that I did not think that *you* would do such a thing!'

The Rector, not unnaturally, was a little confounded by this

sudden attack, and made her no immediate reply. Lord Dolphinton, who had listened intently to what she had to say, was pleased to find that he was able to elucidate. 'Shouldn't have come,' he told his rigid cousin. 'Not the thing for a man in orders. George shouldn't have come either. Not in orders, but not invited.'

'Not want to inherit a fortune!' exclaimed Biddenden, the enormity of such a declaration making it possible for him to ignore Dolphinton's unwelcome intrusion into the argument. 'Pooh! nonsense! You do not know what you are saying!'

'On the contrary,' said the Rector, making a recovery, 'her sentiments do her honour! My dear Kitty, none is more conscious than myself of what must be your reflections upon this occasion. Indeed, you must believe that I share them! That my great-uncle would make *me* the recipient of his fortune was a thought that has never crossed my head: if I have ever indulged my brain with speculations on the nature of his intentions, I have supposed that he would bequeath to his adopted child a respectable independence, and the residue of his estate to that member of the family whom we know to be his favourite great-nephew. None of us, I fancy, could have called in question the propriety of such a disposition; none of us can have imagined that he would, whatever the event, have left that adopted child destitute upon the world.' He saw the startled look in Miss Charing's eyes, and said, with great gentleness: 'That, dearest Kitty, is what he has assured us he will do, should we or you refuse to obey his – I do not scruple to say – *monstrous* command!'

'Destitute?' repeated Kitty, as though the word were unknown.

Lord Biddenden pulled a chair forward, and sat down beside her, possessing himself of one of her hands, and patting it. 'Yes, Kitty, that is the matter in a nutshell,' he said. 'I do not wonder that you should look shocked! *Your* repugnance must be shared by any man of sensibility. The melancholy truth is that you were not born to an independence; your father – a man of excellent family, of course! – was improvident; but for the generosity of my

uncle in adopting you, you must have been reared in such conditions as we will not dwell upon – a stranger to all the elegancies of life, a penniless orphan without a protector to lend you consequence! My dear Kitty, you might even have counted yourself fortunate today to have found yourself in such a situation as Miss Fishguard's!

It was plain, from the impressive dropping of his voice, that he had described to her the lowest depths in which his fancy was capable of imagining her. His solemn manner had its effect; she looked instinctively towards the Rector, upon whose judgment she had been accustomed, of late years, to depend.

'I cannot say that it is untrue,' Hugh responded, in a low tone. 'Indeed, I must acknowledge that whatever may be my uncle's conduct today, however improper in *my* eyes, you are very much beholden to him for his generosity in the past.'

She pulled her hand out of Lord Biddenden's warm, plump clasp, and jumped up, saying impulsively: 'I hope I am not ungrateful, but when you speak of *generosity* I feel as though my heart must burst!'

'Kitty, Kitty, do not talk in that intemperate style!' Hugh said.

'No, no, but you do not understand!' she cried. 'You speak of his fortune, and you know it to be large! Everyone says that, but *I* have no cause to suspect it! If he yielded to a generous impulse when he adopted me, at least he has atoned for that during all these years! No, Hugh, I *won't* hush! Ask poor Fish what wage she has received from him for educating me! Ask her what shifts she has often and often been put to to contrive that I should not be dressed in *rags*! Well, perhaps not rags, precisely, but only look at this gown I am wearing now!'

All three gentlemen obeyed her, but perhaps only Lord Biddenden recognized the justice of her complaint. Hugh said: 'You look very well, Kitty, I assure you. There is a neatness and a propriety –'

'I do not want neatness and propriety!' interrupted Kitty, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes sparkling. 'I want elegant dresses, and I want to have my hair cut in the first style of fashion, and I

want to go to assemblies, and rout-parties, and to the theatre, and to the Opera, and not – *not!* – to be a poor little squab of a dowdy!’

Again, only Biddenden was able to appreciate her feelings. ‘Very understandable!’ he said. ‘It is not at all to be wondered at. Why, you have been kept so cooped-up here that I daresay you may never have attended so much as a concert!’

‘Very true,’ Hugh concurred. ‘I have frequently observed to my uncle that the indulgence of some degree of rational amusement should be granted to you, Kitty. Alas, I fear that his habits and prejudices are fixed! I cannot flatter myself that my words have borne weight with him.’

‘Exactly so!’ Biddenden said. ‘And so it must always be while you remain under this roof, Kitty! However little you may relish the *manner* of my uncle’s proposals, you must perceive all the advantages attached to an eligible marriage. You will have a position of the first respectability; you will be mistress of a very pretty establishment, able to order things as you choose; with the habits of economy you have learnt you will find yourself at the outset most comfortably circumstanced; and in the course of time you will be able to command every imaginable extravagance.’

From his lengthening upper lip it was to be deduced that this sketch of the future made little appeal to the Rector. He said: ‘I do Kitty the justice to believe that the tone of her mind is too nice to allow of her hankering after *extravagance*. I am not a Puritan; I sympathize to the full in her desire to escape from the restrictions imposed upon her by my uncle’s valetudinarian habits –’

‘Oh!’ cried Kitty wistfully, ‘I should like so much to be extravagant!’

‘You will allow me to know you better than you know yourself, dear Kitty,’ responded Hugh, with great firmness. ‘Most naturally, you desire to become better acquainted with the world. You would like to visit the Metropolis, I daresay, and so you shall! You yearn to taste the pleasures enjoyed by those persons who constitute what is known as the *ton*. It is only proper