

One

Sir Tristram Shield, arriving at Lavenham Court in the wintry dusk, was informed at the door that his great-uncle was very weak, not expected to live many more days out. He received these tidings without comment, but as the butler helped him to take off his heavy-caped driving-coat, he inquired in an unemotional voice: 'Is Mr. Lavenham here?'

'At the Dower House, sir,' replied the butler, handing the coat and the high-crowned beaver hat to a footman. He nodded austere dismissal to this underling, and added with a slight cough: 'His lordship has been a little difficult, sir. So far his lordship has not received Mr. Lavenham.'

He paused, waiting for Sir Tristram to inquire after Mademoiselle de Vauban. Sir Tristram, however, merely asked to be conducted to his bedchamber, that he might change his dress before being admitted to his great-uncle's presence.

The butler, as well aware as everyone else at the Court of the reason of Sir Tristram's sudden arrival, was disappointed at this lack of interest, but reflected that Sir Tristram, after all, had never been one to show what he was thinking. He led the way in person across the hall to the oak stairway and went with Sir Tristram up to the Long Gallery. Here, on one side, portraits of dead Lavenhams hung, and, on the other, tall, square-headed mullioned windows looked south over a well-timbered park to the Downs. The silence of the house was disturbed by the rustle of a skirt and the hasty closing of a door at one end of the Gallery. The butler had a shrewd suspicion that Mademoiselle de

Vauban, more curious than Sir Tristram, had been waiting in the Gallery to obtain a glimpse of him. As he opened the door into one of the bedchambers he cast a glance at Shield, and said: 'His lordship has seen no one but the doctor, sir – once, and Mamzelle Eustacie, of course.'

That dark, harsh face told him nothing. 'Yes?' said Shield.

It occurred to the butler that perhaps Sir Tristram might not know why he had been summoned into Sussex. If that were so there was no saying how he might take it. He was not an easy man to drive, as his great-uncle had found more than once in the past. Ten to one there might be trouble.

Sir Tristram's voice interrupted these reflections. 'Send my man up to me, Porson, and inform his lordship of my arrival,' he said.

The butler bowed and withdrew. Sir Tristram walked over to the window, and stood looking out over the formal gardens to the woods beyond, still dimly visible through the gathering twilight. There was a sombre frown in his eyes, and his mouth was compressed in a way that made it appear more grim than usual. He did not turn when the door opened to admit his valet, accompanied by one footman carrying his cloak-bag, and another bearing two gilded candelabra, which he set down on the dressing-table. The sudden candlelight darkened the prospect outside. After a moment Shield came away from the window to the fireplace and stood leaning his arm along the high mantelshelf, and looking down at the smouldering logs. The footman drew the curtains across the windows and went softly away. Jupp, the valet, began to unpack the contents of the cloak-bag, and to lay out upon the bed an evening coat and breeches of mulberry velvet, and a Florentine waistcoat. Sir Tristram stirred the logs in the grate with one top-booted foot. Jupp glanced at him sideways, wondering what was in the wind to make him look so forbidding. 'You'll wear powder, sir?' he suggested, setting the pounce-box and the pomatum down on the dressing-table.

'No.'

Jupp sighed. He had already learned of Mr. Lavenham's presence at the Dower House. It seemed probable that the Beau might come up to the Court to visit his cousin, and Jupp, knowing how skilled was Mr. Lavenham's gentleman in the arrangement of his master's locks, would have liked for his pride's sake to have sent his own master down to dinner properly curled and powdered. He said nothing, however, but knelt down to pull off Sir Tristram's boots.

Half an hour later Shield, summoned by Lord Lavenham's valet, walked down the Gallery to the Great Chamber, and went in unannounced.

The room, wainscoted with oak and hung with crimson curtains, was warmed by a leaping fire and lit by as many as fifty candles in branching candelabra. At the far end a vast four-poster bed was set upon a slight dais. In it, banked up with pillows, covered with a quilt of flaming brocade, wearing an exotic bedgown and the powdered wig without which no one but his valet could ever remember to have seen him, was old Sylvester, ninth Baron Lavenham.

Sir Tristram paused on the threshold, dazzled momentarily by the blaze of unexpected light. The grimness of his face was lessened by a slight sardonic smile as his eyes took in the magnificence and the colour about him. 'Your death-bed, sir?' he inquired.

A thin chuckle came from the four-poster. 'My death-bed,' corroborated Sylvester with a twinkle.

Sir Tristram walked across the floor to the dais. A wasted hand on which a great ruby ring glowed was held out to him. He took it, and stood holding it, looking down into his great-uncle's parchment-coloured face, with its hawk-nose, and bloodless lips, and its deep-sunk brilliant eyes. Sylvester was eighty, and dying, but he still wore his wig and his patches, and clasped in his left hand his snuff-box and laced handkerchief.

Sylvester returned his great-nephew's steady look with one of malicious satisfaction. 'I knew you'd come,' he remarked. He withdrew his hand from the light clasp about it and waved it

towards a chair which had been set on the dais. 'Sit down.' He opened his snuff-box and dipped in his finger and thumb. 'When did I see you last?' he inquired, shaking away the residue of the snuff and holding an infinitesimal pinch to one nostril.

Sir Tristram sat down, full in the glare of a cluster of candles on a torchère pedestal. The golden light cast his profile into strong relief against the crimson velvet bed-curtains. 'It must have been about two years ago, I believe,' he answered.

Sylvester gave another chuckle. 'A loving family, ain't we?' He shut his snuff-box and dusted his fingers with his handkerchief. 'That other great-nephew of mine is here,' he remarked abruptly.

'So I've heard.'

'Seen him?'

'No.'

'You will,' said Sylvester. 'I shan't.'

'Why not?' asked Shield, looking at him under his black brows.

'Because I don't want to,' replied Sylvester frankly. 'Beau Lavenham! *I* was Beau Lavenham in my day, but d'ye suppose that I decked myself out in a green coat and yellow pantaloons?'

'Probably not,' said Shield.

'Damned smooth-spoken fellow!' said Sylvester. 'Never liked him. Never liked his father either. His mother used to suffer from the vapours. She suffered from them – whole series of 'em! – when she wanted me to let her have the Dower House.'

'Well, she got the Dower House,' said Shield dryly.

'Of course she did!' said Sylvester snappishly, and relapsed into one of the forgetful silences of old age. A log falling out on to the hearth recalled him. He opened his eyes again and said: 'Did I tell you why I wanted you?'

Sir Tristram had risen and gone over to the fire to replace the smoking log. He did not answer until he had done so, and then he said in his cool, disinterested voice: 'You wrote that you had arranged a marriage for me with your granddaughter.'

The piercing eyes gleamed. 'It don't please you much, eh?'

‘Not much,’ admitted Shield, coming back to the dais.

‘It’s a good match,’ offered Sylvester. ‘I’ve settled most of the unentailed property on her, and she’s half French, you know – understands these arrangements. You can go your own road. She’s not at all like her mother.’

‘I never knew her mother,’ said Shield discouragingly.

‘She was a fool!’ said Sylvester. ‘Never think she could be a daughter of mine. She eloped with a frippery Frenchman: that shows you. What was his damned name?’

‘De Vauban.’

‘So it was. The Vidame de Vauban. I forget when he died. Marie died three years ago, and I went over to Paris – a year later, I think, but my memory’s not what it was.’

‘A little more than a year later, sir.’

‘I dare say. It was after –’ He paused for a moment, and then added harshly: ‘– after Ludovic’s affair. I thought France was growing too hot for any grandchild of mine, and by God I was right! How long is it now since they sent the King to the guillotine? Over a month, eh? Mark me, Tristram, the Queen will go the same road before the year is out. I’m happy to think I shan’t be here to see it. Charming she was, charming! But you wouldn’t remember. Twenty years ago we used to wear her colour. Everything was Queen’s Hair: satins, ribbons, shoes. Now’ – his lip curled into a sneer – ‘now I’ve a great-nephew who wears a green coat and yellow pantaloons, and a damned absurd sugar-loaf on his head!’ He raised his heavy eyelids suddenly, and added: ‘But the boy is still my heir!’

Sir Tristram said nothing in answer to this remark, which had been flung at him almost like a challenge. Sylvester took snuff again, and when he spoke it was once more in his faintly mocking drawl. ‘He’d marry Eustacie if he could, but she don’t like him.’ He fobbed his snuff-box with a flick of his finger. ‘The long and the short of it is, I’ve a fancy to see her married to you before I die, Tristram.’

‘Why?’ asked Shield.

‘There’s no one else,’ replied Sylvester bluntly. ‘My fault, of

course. I should have provided for her – taken her up to London. But I'm old, and I've never pleased anyone but myself. I haven't been to London above twice in the last three years. Too late to think of that now. I'm dying, and damme, the chit's my grandchild! I'll leave her safely bestowed. Time you was thinking of marriage.'

'I have thought of it.'

Sylvester looked sharply at him. 'Not in love, are you?'

Shield's face hardened. 'No.'

'If you're still letting a cursed silly calf affair rankle with you, you're a fool!' said Sylvester. 'I've forgotten the rights of it, if ever I knew them, but they don't interest me. Most women will play you false, and I never met one yet that wasn't a fool at heart. I'm offering you a marriage of convenience.'

'Does she understand that?' asked Shield.

'Wouldn't understand anything else,' replied Sylvester. 'She's a Frenchwoman.'

Sir Tristram stepped down from the dais, and went over to the fireplace. Sylvester watched him in silence, and after a moment he said: 'It might answer.'

'You're the last of your name,' Sylvester reminded him.

'I know it. I've every intention of marrying.'

'No one in your eye?'

'No.'

'Then you'll marry Eustacie,' said Sylvester. 'Pull the bell!'

Sir Tristram obeyed, but with a look of amusement: 'Your dying wish, Sylvester?'

'I shan't live the week out,' replied Sylvester cheerfully. 'Heart and hard living, Tristram. Don't pull a long face at my funeral! Eighty years is enough for any man, and I've had the gout for twenty of them.' He saw his valet come into the room, and said: 'Send Mademoiselle to me.'

'You take a great deal for granted, Sylvester,' remarked Sir Tristram, as the valet went out again.

Sylvester had leaned his head back against the pillows, and closed his eyes. There was a suggestion of exhaustion in his

attitude, but when he opened his eyes they were very much alive, and impishly intelligent. 'You would not have come here, my dear Tristram, had you not already made up your mind.'

Sir Tristram smiled a little reluctantly, and transferred his attention to the fire.

It was not long before the door opened again. Sir Tristram turned as Mademoiselle de Vauban came into the room, and stood looking at her under bent brows.

His first thought was that she was unmistakably a Frenchwoman, and not in the least the type of female he admired. She had glossy black hair, dressed in the newest fashion, and her eyes were so dark that it was hard to know whether they were brown or black. Her inches were few, but her figure was extremely good, and she bore herself with an air. She paused just inside the door, and, at once perceiving Sir Tristram, gave back his stare with one every whit as searching and a good deal more speculative.

Sylvester allowed them to weigh one another for several moments before he spoke, but presently he said: 'Come here, my child. And you, Tristram.'

The promptness with which his granddaughter obeyed this summons augured a docility wholly belied by the resolute, not to say wilful, set of her pretty mouth. She trod gracefully across the room, and curtsied to Sylvester before stepping up on to the dais. Sir Tristram came more slowly to the bedside, nor did it escape Eustacie's notice that he had apparently looked his fill at her. His eyes, still sombre and slightly frowning, now rested on Sylvester.

Sylvester stretched out his left hand to Eustacie. 'Let me present to you, my child, your cousin Tristram.'

'Your very obedient cousin,' said Shield, bowing.

'It is to me a great happiness to meet my cousin,' enunciated Eustacie with prim civility and a slight, not displeasing French accent.

'I am a little tired,' said Sylvester. 'If I were not I might allow you time to become better acquainted. And yet I don't know: I

dare say it's as well as it is,' he added cynically. 'If you want a formal offer, Eustacia, no doubt Tristram will make you one — after dinner.'

'I do not want a formal offer,' replied Mademoiselle de Vauban. 'It is to me a matter quite immaterial, but my name is Eustacie, which is, *enfin*, a very good name, and it is *not* Eu-sta-ci-a, which I cannot at all pronounce, and which I find excessively ugly.'

This speech, which was delivered in a firm and perfectly self-possessed voice, had the effect of making Sir Tristram cast another of his searching glances at the lady. He said with a faint smile: 'I hope I may be permitted to call you Eustacie, cousin?'

'Certainly; it will be quite *convenable*,' replied Eustacie, bestowing a brilliant smile upon him.

'She's eighteen,' said Sylvester abruptly. 'How old are you?'

'Thirty-one,' answered Sir Tristram uncompromisingly.

'H'm!' said Sylvester. 'A very excellent age.'

'For what?' asked Eustacie.

'For marriage, miss!'

Eustacie gave him a thoughtful look, but volunteered no further remark.

'You may go down to dinner now,' said Sylvester. 'I regret that I am unable to bear you company, but I trust that the Nuits I have instructed Porson to give you will help you to overcome any feeling of *gêne* which might conceivably attack you.'

'You are all consideration, sir,' said Shield. 'Shall we go, cousin?'

Eustacie, who did not appear to suffer from *gêne*, assented, curtsied again to her grandfather, and accompanied Sir Tristram downstairs to the dining-room.

The butler had set their places at opposite ends of the great table, an arrangement in which both tacitly acquiesced, though it made conversation a trifle remote. Dinner, which was served in the grand manner, was well chosen, well cooked, and very long. Sir Tristram noticed that his prospective bride enjoyed a hearty appetite, and discovered after five minutes that she

possessed a flow of artless conversation, quite unlike any he had been used to listen to in London drawing-rooms. He was prepared to find her embarrassed by a situation which struck him as being fantastic, and was somewhat startled when she remarked: 'It is a pity that you are so dark, because I do not like dark men in general. However, one must accustom oneself.'

'Thank you,' said Shield.

'If my grandpapa had left me in France it is probable that I should have married a Duke,' said Eustacie. 'My uncle – the present Vidame, you understand – certainly intended it.'

'You would more probably have gone to the guillotine,' replied Sir Tristram, depressingly matter-of-fact.

'Yes, that is quite true,' agreed Eustacie. 'We used to talk of it, my cousin Henriette and I. We made up our minds we should be entirely brave, not crying, of course, but perhaps a little pale, in a proud way. Henriette wished to go to the guillotine *en grande tenue*, but that was only because she had a court dress of yellow satin which she thought became her much better than it did really. For me, I think one should wear white to the guillotine if one is quite young, and not carry anything except perhaps a handkerchief. Do you not agree?'

'I don't think it signifies what you wear if you are on your way to the scaffold,' replied Sir Tristram, quite unappreciative of the picture his cousin was dwelling on with such evident admiration.

She looked at him in surprise. 'Don't you? But consider! You would be very sorry for a young girl in a tumbril, dressed all in white, pale, but *quite* unafraid, and not attending to the *canaille* at all, but –'

'I should be very sorry for anyone in a tumbril, whatever their age or sex or apparel,' interrupted Sir Tristram.

'You would be more sorry for a young girl – all alone, and perhaps bound,' said Eustacie positively.

'You wouldn't be all alone. There would be a great many other people in the tumbril with you,' said Sir Tristram.

Eustacie eyed him with considerable displeasure. 'In my

tumbrel there would *not* have been a great many other people,' she said.

Perceiving that argument on this point would be fruitless, Sir Tristram merely looked sceptical and refrained from speech.

'A Frenchman,' said Eustacie, 'would understand at once.'

'I am not a Frenchman,' replied Sir Tristram.

'*Ça se voit!*' retorted Eustacie.

Sir Tristram served himself from a dish of mutton steaks and cucumber.

'The people whom I have met in England,' said Eustacie after a short silence, 'consider it very romantic that I was rescued from the Terror.'

Her tone suggested strongly that he also ought to consider it romantic, but as he was fully aware that Sylvester had travelled to Paris some time before the start of the Terror, and had removed his granddaughter from France in the most unexciting way possible, he only replied: 'I dare say.'

'I know a family who escaped from Paris in a cart full of turnips,' said Eustacie. 'The soldiers stuck their bayonets into the turnips, too.'

'I trust they did not also stick them into the family?'

'No, but they might easily have done so. You do not at all realize what it is like in Paris now. One lives in constant anxiety. It is even dangerous to step out of doors.'

'It must be a great relief to you to find yourself in Sussex.'

She fixed her large eyes on his face, and said: 'Yes, but – do you not like exciting things, *mon cousin?*'

'I do not like revolutions, if that is what you mean.'

She shook her head. 'Ah no, but romance, and – and adventure!'

He smiled. 'When I was eighteen I expect I did.'

A depressed silence fell. 'Grandpère says that you will make me a very good husband,' said Eustacie presently.

Taken by surprise, Shield replied stiffly: 'I shall endeavour to do so, cousin.'

‘And I expect,’ said Eustacie, despondently inspecting a dish of damson tartlets, ‘that he is quite right. You look to me like a good husband.’

‘Indeed?’ said Sir Tristram, unreasonably annoyed by this remark. ‘I am sorry that I cannot return the compliment by telling you that you look like a good wife.’

The gentle melancholy which had descended on Eustacie vanished. She dimpled delightfully, and said: ‘No, I don’t, do I? But do you think that I am pretty?’

‘Very,’ answered Shield in a damping tone.

‘Yes, so do I,’ said Eustacie. ‘In London I think I might have a great success, because I do not look like an Englishwoman, and I have noticed that the English think that foreigners are very *épatantes*.’

‘Unfortunately,’ said Sir Tristram, ‘London is becoming so full of French *émigrés* that I doubt whether you would find yourself in any way remarkable.’

‘I remember now,’ said Eustacie. ‘You do not like women.’

Sir Tristram, uncomfortably aware of the footman behind his chair, cast a glance at his cousin’s empty plate, and got up. ‘Let us go into the drawing-room,’ he said. ‘This is hardly the place to discuss such – er – intimate matters!’

Eustacie, who seemed to regard the servants as so many pieces of furniture, looked round in a puzzled way, but made no objection to leaving the dining-table. She accompanied Sir Tristram to the drawing-room, and said, almost before he had shut the door: ‘Tell me, do you mind very much that you are to marry me?’

He answered in an annoyed voice: ‘My dear cousin, I do not know who told you that I dislike women, but it is a gross exaggeration.’

‘Yes, but do you mind?’

‘I should not be here if I minded.’

‘Truly? But everybody has to do what Grandpère tells them.’

‘Not quite everybody,’ said Shield. ‘Sylvester knows, however, that –’

‘You should not call your great-uncle Sylvester!’ interrupted Eustacie. ‘It is not at all respectful.’

‘My good child, the whole world has called him Sylvester for the past forty years!’

‘Oh!’ said Eustacie doubtfully. She sat down on a sofa upholstered in blue-and-gold-striped satin, folded her hands, and looked expectantly at her suitor.

He found this wide, innocent gaze a trifle disconcerting, but after a moment he said with a gleam of amusement: ‘There is an awkwardness in this situation, cousin, which I, alas, do not seem to be the man to overcome. You must forgive me if I appear to you to be lacking in sensibility. Sylvester has arranged a marriage of convenience for us, and allowed neither of us time to become in the least degree acquainted before we go to the altar.’

‘In France,’ replied Eustacie, ‘one is not acquainted with one’s betrothed, because it is not permitted that one should converse with him alone until one is married.’

This remark certainly seemed to bear out Sylvester’s assurance that his granddaughter understood the nature of his arrangements. Sir Tristram said: ‘It would be absurd to pretend that either of us can feel for the other any of those passions which are ordinarily to be looked for in betrothed couples, but –’

‘Oh yes, it *would!*’ agreed Eustacie heartily.

‘Nevertheless,’ pursued Sir Tristram, ‘I believe such marriages as ours often prosper. You have accused me of disliking females, but believe me –’

‘I can see very well that you dislike females,’ interrupted Eustacie. ‘I ask myself why it is that you wish to be married.’

He hesitated, and then answered bluntly: ‘Perhaps if I had a brother I should not wish it, but I am the last of my name, and I must not let it die with me. I shall count myself fortunate if you will consent to be my wife, and so far as it may lie in my power I will promise that you shall not have cause to regret it. May I tell Sylvester that we have agreed to join hands?’

‘*Qu’importe?* It is his command, and naturally he knows we shall be married. Do you think we shall be happy?’

‘I hope so, cousin.’

‘Yes, but I must tell you that you are not at all the sort of man I thought I should marry. It is very disheartening. I thought that in England one was permitted to fall in love and marry of one’s own choice. Now I see that it is just the same as it is in France.’

He said with a touch of compassion: ‘You are certainly very young to be married, but when Sylvester dies you will be alone, and your situation would be awkward indeed.’

‘That is quite true,’ nodded Eustacie. ‘I have considered it well. And I dare say it will not be so very bad, our marriage, if I can have a house in town, and perhaps a lover.’

‘Perhaps a *what?*’ demanded Shield, in a voice that made her jump.

‘Well, in France it is quite *comme il faut* – in fact, quite *à la mode* – to have a lover when one is married,’ she explained, not in the least abashed.

‘In England,’ said Sir Tristram, ‘it is neither *comme il faut* nor *à la mode*.’

‘*Vraiment?* I do not yet know what is the fashion in England, but naturally if you assure me it is not *à la mode*, I won’t have any lover. Can I have a house in town?’

‘I don’t think you know what you are talking about,’ said Sir Tristram, on a note of relief. ‘My home is in Berkshire, and I hope you will grow to like it as I do, but I can hire a house in town for the season if your heart is set on it.’

Eustacie was just about to inform him that her heart was irrevocably set on it when the butler opened the door and announced the arrival of Mr. Lavenham. Eustacie broke off in mid-sentence, and said under her breath: ‘Well, I would much rather be married to you than to him, at all events!’

Her expression did not lead Sir Tristram to set undue store by this handsome admission. He frowned reprovingly at her, and went forward to greet his cousin.

Beau Lavenham, who was two years younger than Shield, did not resemble him in the least. Sir Tristram was a large, lean man, very dark, harsh-featured, and with few airs or graces; the Beau

was of medium height only, slim rather than lean, of a medium complexion and delicately-moulded features, and his graces were many. Nothing could have been more exquisite than the arrangement of his powdered curls, or the cut of his brown-spotted silk coat and breeches. He wore a waistcoat embroidered with gold and silver, and stockings of palest pink, a jewel in the snowy folds of his cravat, knots of ribbons at his knees, and rings on his slender white fingers. In one hand he carried his snuff-box and scented handkerchief; in the other he held up an ornate quizzing-glass that hung on a riband round his neck. Through this he surveyed his two cousins, blandly smiling and quite at ease. 'Ah, Tristram!' he said in a soft, languid voice, and, letting fall his quizzing-glass, held out his hand. 'How do you do, my dear fellow?'

Sir Tristram shook hands with him. 'How do you do, Basil? It's some time since we met.'

The Beau made a gesture of deprecation. 'But, my dear Tristram, if you *will* bury yourself in Berkshire what is one to do? Eustacie –!' He went to her, and bowed over her hand with incomparable grace. 'So you have been making Tristram's acquaintance?'

'Yes,' said Eustacie. 'We are betrothed.'

The Beau raised his brows, smiling. 'Ooh la, la! So soon? Did Sylvester call this tune? Well, you are, both of you, very obedient, but are you quite, quite sure that you will deal well together?'

'Oh, I hope so!' replied Sir Tristram bracingly.

'If you are determined – and I must warn you, Eustacie, that he is the most determined fellow imaginable – I must hope so too. But I do not think I expected either of you to be so *very* obedient. Sylvester is prodigious – quite prodigious! One cannot believe that he is really dying. A world without Sylvester! Surely it must be impossible!'

'It will seem odd, indeed,' Shield said calmly.

Eustacie looked disparagingly at the Beau. 'And it will seem odd to me when you are Lord Lavenham – very odd!'

There was a moment's silence. The Beau glanced at Sir

Tristram, and then said: 'Ah yes, but, you see, I shall not be Lord Lavenham. My dear Tristram, do, I beg of you, try some of this snuff of mine, and let me have your opinion of it. I have added the veriest dash of Macouba to my old blend. Now, was I right?'

'I'm not a judge,' said Shield, helping himself to a pinch. 'It seems well enough.'

Eustacie was frowning. 'But I don't understand! Why will you not be Lord Lavenham?'

The Beau turned courteously towards her. 'Well, Eustacie, I am not Sylvester's grandson, but only his great-nephew.'

'But when there is no grandson it must surely be you who are the heir?'

'Precisely, but there is a grandson, dear cousin. Did you not know that?'

'Certainly I know that there was Ludovic, but he is dead after all!'

'Who told you Ludovic was dead?' asked Shield, looking at her under knit brows.

She spread out her hands. 'But Grandpère, naturally! And I have often wanted to know what it was that he did that was so entirely wicked that no one must speak of him. It is a mystery, and, I think, very romantic.'

'There is no mystery,' said Shield, 'nor is it in the least romantic. Ludovic was a wild young man who crowned a series of follies with murder, and had in consequence to fly the country.'

'Murder!' exclaimed Eustacie. '*Voyons*, do you mean he killed someone in a duel?'

'No. Not in a duel.'

'But, Tristram,' said the Beau gently, 'you must not forget that it was never proved that Ludovic was the man who shot Matthew Plunkett. For my part I did not believe it possible then, and I still do not.'

'Very handsome of you, but the circumstances were too damning,' replied Shield. 'Remember that I myself heard the shot that must have killed Plunkett not ten minutes after I had parted from Ludovic.'

‘But I,’ said the Beau, languidly polishing his quizzing-glass, ‘prefer to believe Ludovic’s own story, that it was an owl he shot at.’

‘Shot – but missed!’ said Shield. ‘Yet I have watched Ludovic shoot the pips out of a playing-card at twenty yards.’

‘Oh, admitted, Tristram, admitted, but on that particular night I think Ludovic was not entirely sober, was he?’

Eustacie struck her hands together impatiently. ‘But tell me, one of you! What did he do, my cousin Ludovic?’

The Beau tossed back the ruffles from his hand, and dipped his finger and thumb in his snuff-box. ‘Well, Tristram,’ he said with his glinting smile. ‘You know more about it than I do. Are you going to tell her?’

‘It is not an edifying story,’ Shield said. ‘Why do you want to hear it?’

‘Because I think perhaps my cousin Ludovic is of this family the most romantic person!’ replied Eustacie.

‘Oh, romantic!’ said Sir Tristram, turning away with a shrug of the shoulders.

The Beau fobbed his snuff-box. ‘Romantic?’ he said meditatively. ‘No, I do not think Ludovic was romantic. A little rash, perhaps. He was a gamester – whence the disasters which befell him. He lost a very large sum of money one night at the Cocoa-Tree to a man who lived at Furze House, not two miles from here.’

‘No one lives at Furze House,’ interrupted Eustacie.

‘Not now,’ agreed the Beau. ‘Three years ago Sir Matthew Plunkett lived there. But Sir Matthew – three years ago – was shot in the Longshaw Spinney, and his widow removed from the neighbourhood.’

‘Did my cousin Ludovic shoot him?’

‘That, my dear Eustacie, is a matter of opinion. You will get one answer from Tristram, and another from me.’

‘But why?’ she demanded. ‘Not just because he had lost money to him! That, after all, is not such a great matter – unless perhaps he was quite ruined?’

‘Oh, by no means! He did lose a large sum to him, however, and Sir Matthew, being a person of – let us say indifferent breeding – was ill-mannered enough to demand a pledge in security before he would continue playing. Of course, one should never play with Cits, but poor dear Ludovic was always so headstrong. The game was piquet, and both were in their cups. Ludovic took from his finger a certain ring, and gave it to Sir Matthew as a pledge – to be redeemed, naturally. It was a talisman ring of great antiquity which had come to Ludovic through his mother, who was the last of a much older house than ours.’

Eustacie stopped him. ‘Please, I do not know what is a talisman ring.’

‘Just a golden ring with figures engraved upon it. This of Ludovic’s was, as I have said, very old. The characters on it were supposed to be magical. It should, according to ancient belief, have protected him from any harm. More important, it was an heirloom. I don’t know its precise value. Tristram, you are a judge of such things – you must make him show you his collection, Eustacie – what was the value of the ring?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Shield curtly. ‘It was very old – perhaps priceless.’

‘Such a rash creature, poor Ludovic!’ sighed the Beau. ‘I believe there was no stopping him – was there, Tristram?’

‘No.’

Eustacie turned towards Shield. ‘But were you there, then?’

‘Yes, I was there.’

‘But no one, not even Tristram, could manage Ludovic in his wilder moods,’ explained the Beau. ‘He pledged the ring, and continued to lose. Sir Matthew, with what one cannot but feel to have been a lamentable want of taste, left the Cocoa-Tree with the ring upon his finger. To redeem it Ludovic was forced to go to the Jews – ah, that means money-lenders, my dear!’

‘There was nothing new in that,’ said Shield. ‘Ludovic had been in the Jews’ hands since he came down from Oxford – and before.’

‘Like so many of us,’ murmured the Beau.

‘And did he get the money from the Jews?’ asked Eustacie.

‘Oh yes,’ replied the Beau, ‘but the matter was not so easily settled. When Ludovic called upon Plunkett to redeem the ring our ingenious friend pretended that the bargain had been quite misunderstood, that he had in fact staked his guineas against the ring, and won it outright. He would not give it up, nor could anyone but Tristram be found who had been sober enough to vouch for the truth of Ludovic’s version of the affair.’

Eustacie’s eyes flashed. ‘I am not at all surprised that Ludovic killed this *canaille*! He was without honour!’

The Beau played with his quizzing-glass. ‘People who collect objects of rarity, my dear Eustacie, will often, so I believe, go to quite unheard-of lengths to acquire the prize they covet.’

‘But you!’ said Eustacie, looking fiercely at Sir Tristram. ‘You knew the truth!’

‘Unfortunately,’ replied Sir Tristram, ‘Plunkett did not wait for my ruling. He retired into the country – to Furze House, in fact – and somewhat unwisely refused to see Ludovic.’

‘Did Grandpère know of this?’ Eustacie asked.

‘Dear me, no!’ said the Beau. ‘Sylvester and Ludovic were so rarely on amicable terms. And then there was that little matter of Ludovic’s indebtedness to the Jews. One can hardly blame Ludovic for not taking Sylvester into his confidence. However, Ludovic came home to this house, bringing Tristram, with the intention of confronting Plunkett with the one – er – reliable witness to the affair. But Plunkett was singularly elusive – not unnaturally, of course. When Ludovic called at Furze House he was never at home. One must admit that Ludovic was not precisely the man to accept such treatment patiently. And he was drinking rather heavily at that time, too. Discovering that Plunkett was to dine at a house in Slaugham upon the very day that he had been refused admittance to Furze House for the third time, he conceived the plan of waylaying him upon his return home, and forcing

him to accept bills in exchange for the ring. Only Tristram, finding him gone from here, guessed what he would be at, and followed him.'

'The boy was three parts drunk!' said Sir Tristram over his shoulder.

'I have no doubt he was in a very dangerous humour,' agreed the Beau. 'It has always been a source of wonderment to me how you persuaded him to relinquish his purpose and return home.'

'I promised to see Plunkett in his stead,' replied Shield. 'Like a fool I let him take the path through the spinney.'

'My dear fellow, no one could have expected you to have foreseen that Plunkett would return by that path,' said the Beau gently.

'On the contrary, if he came from Slaugham it was the most natural way for him to take,' retorted Shield. 'And we knew he was riding, not driving.'

'So what happened?' breathed Eustacie.

It was Shield who answered her. 'Ludovic rode back through the Longshaw Spinney, while I went on towards Furze House. Not ten minutes after we had parted I heard a shot fired in the distance. At the time I made nothing of it: it might have been a poacher. Next morning Plunkett's body was discovered in the spinney with a shot through the heart, and a crumpled handkerchief of Ludovic's lying beside it.'

'And the ring?' Eustacie said quickly.

'The ring was gone,' said Shield. 'There was money in Plunkett's pockets, and a diamond pin in his cravat, but of the talisman ring no sign.'

'And it has never been seen since,' added the Beau.

'By us, no!' said Sir Tristram.

'Yes, yes, I know that you think Ludovic has it,' said the Beau, 'but Ludovic swore he did not meet Plunkett that night, and I for one do not think that Ludovic was a liar. He admitted freely that he carried a pistol in his pocket, he even admitted that he had fired it – at an owl.'

‘Why should he not shoot this Plunkett?’ demanded Eustacie. ‘He deserved to be shot! I am very glad that he was shot!’

‘Possibly,’ said Sir Tristram in his dryest tone, ‘but in England, whatever it may be in France, murder is a capital offence.’

‘But they did not hang him just for killing such a one as this Plunkett?’ said Eustacie, shocked.

‘No, because we got him out of the country before he could be arrested,’ Shield answered.

The Beau lifted his hand. ‘Sylvester and you got him out of the country,’ he corrected. ‘I had no hand in that, if you please.’

‘Had he stayed to face a trial nothing could have saved his neck.’

‘There I beg to differ from you, my dear Tristram,’ said the Beau calmly. ‘Had he been permitted to face his trial the truth might have been found out. When you – and Sylvester, of course – smuggled him out of the country you made him appear a murderer confessed.’

Sir Tristram was spared the necessity of answering by the entrance of Sylvester’s valet, who came to summon him to his great-uncle’s presence again. He went at once, a circumstance which provoked the Beau to murmur as the door closed behind him: ‘It is really most gratifying to see Tristram so complaisant.’

Eustacie paid no heed to this, but said: ‘Where is my cousin Ludovic now?’

‘No one knows, my dear. He has vanished.’

‘And you do not do anything to help him, any of you!’ she said indignantly.

‘Well, dear cousin, it is a little difficult, is it not?’ replied the Beau. ‘After that well-meaning but fatal piece of meddling, what could one do?’

‘I think,’ said Eustacie with a darkling brow, ‘that Tristram did not like my cousin Ludovic.’

The Beau laughed. ‘How clever of you, my dear!’

She looked at him. ‘What did you mean when you said he must show me his collection?’ she asked directly.