

One

In the guide-books it figured as Stanyon Castle; on the tongues of the villagers, it was the Castle; the Polite World spoke of it as Stanyon, as it spoke of Woburn, and of Cheveley. It was situated in Lincolnshire, not very many miles from Grantham, rather nearer to Stamford: a locality considered by those who were more interested in the chase than in any particular grandeur of scenery to be admirable. It had more claim to be called a Castle than many another nobleman's seat. A mediæval fortress, of which various not very interesting records were to be found in the muniment room, now used by Mr Theodore Frant as an office, had previously stood upon the site; and such portions of the ancient building as had survived the passage of time had been incorporated into the Tudor manor which had succeeded the fortress. Later generations had enlarged and beautified the structure much as their fancies dictated, any difficulty of adding to the mansion being overcome by the designing of another court. The Frant who survived friendship with Bluff King Hal scandalized his generation by the lavish use of oak for wainscoting; his grandson, having enjoyed the advantages of travel, built a new wing, and embellished the old with gildings and painted ceilings; a later Frant, succumbing to the prevailing fashion, ran riot in the rococo style, created the Fountain Court, and was prevented only by death from attempting something of a still more grandiose conception; his heir, one of Mr Walpole's more fervid adherents, reverted to the Gothick, and by the time an unlucky fall at a regular stitcher,

when out with the Old Club, put a period to his career, nowhere in England could have been found such massive doors of oak, such ponderous iron latches, so many pointed, narrow windows, as at Stanyon.

The sixth Earl of St Erth, possibly thinking that his principal seat already sprawled over too much ground, more probably prevented from adding a wing in the Palladian style by the straitened times in which he had the ill-fortune to live, contented himself with rebuilding the stables, papering a great many of the rooms, and installing a closed-stove in the enormous kitchen. This was declared by an embittered valet to be the only sign of modern civilization in the entire pile; but the head-cook, mistrusting modernity, allowed it to be used merely for the boiling of vegetables by one of his underlings, while he himself continued to preside over his furnace, with its antiquated ovens, its huge spits, and its iron cauldrons. Unaccustomed guests, wandering distractedly down ill-lit galleries, discovering stairs that led only to uncharted domestic regions, and arriving, flustered and exhausted, where they had been for long attended, had been known to express astonishment that anyone should choose to live in such a rabbit-warren when he owned two other and more convenient country residences. Neither of these, it was true, could boast of Great Halls, Minstrels' Galleries, Armouries, Towers, or Moats: on the other hand, no draughts whistled down their passages; no creeping chill arose from damp walls; and their chimneys very rarely smoked.

Neither the sixth Earl nor his second wife perceived anything amiss with Stanyon: the Earl because it was the home of his childhood, his lady because she had been bred in an even more inconvenient mansion in the bleak north, and would, in any event, have unhesitatingly bartered comfort for pomp, had she been offered a choice in the matter. The Earl's first wife had hated Stanyon. But the Earl's first wife, though admittedly a lady of birth and quite remarkable beauty, had proved herself to have been quite unworthy of the high position she was called upon to fill. Before her son was out of leading-strings, she ran away with

a notorious rake. Her lord, cuckolded, betrayed, and turned into a laughing-stock, expunged her name from the family records, permitted no mention of her to be made within his walls, and scarcely thought himself avenged when he learned that she had died, three years after her flight, in conditions of distress and hardship. His steward and his housekeeper, both persons of sentiment, hoped that upon his death-bed he would remember her, and speak of her with a forgiving tongue, for it seemed to them incredible that so gentle and lovely a lady should hold no place in his heart or memory. They even indulged their fancies by supposing that his overt dislike of his elder son was caused by the secret pangs the sight of the fair boy, who was indeed the image of his mother, caused him to feel. But if the Reverend Felix Clowne, my lord's Chaplain, was to be believed, the Earl's last coherent speech, forcibly phrased if feebly uttered, was a complaint that the wine he had commanded his valet to bring to his room was corked. He had earlier bestowed his blessing upon Martin, his younger son; he had had a kind word for Theodore, his nephew; he had taken punctilious leave of his lady; he had sent proper messages to his married daughter; but the names of his first wife and of his heir had not passed his lips. Nor had his heir arrived at Stanyon to attend his death-bed, although it was certain that Mr Theodore Frant had sent a letter express to him in Flanders, warning him that his father's demise was imminent. Captain Viscount Desborough, as he then was styled, was at Mons, with his regiment, and it was conceivable that a high sense of his military duties had prevented him from applying for furlough at a moment when Napoleon was almost hourly expected to cross the frontier. But the seventh Earl, surviving a minor, but rather bloody, engagement at the village of Genappe, and a major engagement at Waterloo, still showed no disposition to return to the home of his ancestors. He sold out, but he remained on the Continent, reposing the fullest confidence in his cousin's ability to administer his estates. Not until twelve calendar months had passed since his father's death did his cousin, and the Dowager Countess, receive tidings from him that

he was in England, and about to take possession of his inheritance. He wrote a very civil letter to his mother-in-law, informing her of the proposed date of his arrival at Stanyon, and enquiring in the politest way after her health, and the healths of his half-brother and sister. It was a very pretty letter, the Dowager allowed, but, she added, in unhopeful accents, his mother had had just such caressing ways, and had shown herself to be a Snake in the Bosom.

‘I should perhaps warn you, ma’am, that my cousin will not relish animadversions upon the character of his mother,’ said Mr Theodore Frant, a little tight-lipped. ‘In his presence, such remarks should be spared.’

‘My dear Theo,’ responded the Dowager, ‘it would be odd indeed if I were to be obliged to consult you on the observances of civility!’ He bowed, and, because she cherished no ill-will towards him, she said graciously: ‘Or anyone else, I am sure! In *this* house, Desborough – or, as I must learn to call him, St Erth – may be sure of every attention called for by his consequence.’

‘Just so, ma’am,’ Mr Frant said, bowing again.

‘Providence has decreed that he should succeed to his dear father’s honours,’ pronounced the Dowager, thinking poorly of Providence. ‘One might have supposed that military service in the Peninsula – a very unhealthy locality, I understand, setting aside the chances of Violent Death in an engagement, which cannot be altogether precluded – might have rendered the present occasion unnecessary. But it was not to be! Had my advice been sought, I should have considered myself bound to state that a military career, for one whom I should have had no hesitation in declaring to be far from robust, could be little short of Fatal! That, my dear Theo, I must have said, for, whatever must be my maternal feelings, if there be *one* thing upon which I pride myself it is my observance of my duty as a Christian! Happily, as it then seemed (though, according to the workings of an inscrutable fate, it now appears to be a circumstance of little moment), my advice was *not* sought. Since Lady Penistone chose to interest herself so particularly in her grandson, and my dear

husband saw nothing objectionable in the connection, it was not for me to raise my voice. On her head, I said at the time, be the outcome! No doubt her ladyship is a good enough sort of a woman in her way: I do her the justice to acknowledge that she did *not*, as one might have feared she would, from the incurable levity of her behaviour, condone her unhappy daughter's misconduct: but if she petted and indulged Desborough from any other motive than a malicious desire to tease my poor husband I shall own myself astonished! A spiritless boy, I always thought him, with too much reserve to be pleasing. His career at Eton, you know, was quite undistinguished: a very odd sort of a soldier he must have been!

'It is some years since you have seen my cousin, ma'am,' Mr Frant interposed, in a measured tone.

'I hope,' said the Dowager, 'I am not to be blamed for that! If Lady Penistone chose to invite the boy to stay with her during his school-vacations, and my lord to acquiesce in the arrangement, I take heaven to witness that it was by no expressed wish of mine that Desborough ceased to regard Stanyon as his natural home! On every head my conscience is easy: while he was a child I did my duty towards him; and I am determined now that as no word of censure for his conduct in absenting himself from a beloved parent's obsequies shall be permitted to pass my lips, so also no mark of the respect due to the Head of the Family shall be unobserved. I shall receive him in the Hall.'

This momentous decision being faithfully adhered to, a chilly afternoon in spring saw five persons assembled in what had once been the Great Hall of the Castle. The artistic energies of several generations had largely obliterated most of its original features, but the hammer-beams in its lofty roof remained, and a vast fireplace, made to accommodate the better part of several tree-trunks. The carved screens, having been discovered to have become worm-eaten, had been removed in a previous age, the apartment being thrown open to the vestibule, or entrance-hall, situated at right-angles to it. From this smaller apartment the Grand Stairway, erected in the latter half of the seventeenth

century on a scale designed to allow some dozen persons to walk up it abreast, rose in one imposing flight to a broad half-landing, whence it branched to right and left, thus attaining the main gallery of the Castle. Several massive doors strengthened by applied iron-straps, besides the great front-door opposite to the staircase, opened on to the vestibule, a circumstance which added nothing to the comfort of the Hall, in itself a passage to a series of saloons beyond it. The heat thrown out by the logs burning in the fireplace was considerable, but was unavailing to prevent the draughts sweeping through the room. These seemed to come from all quarters, even the heavy curtains which had been drawn across the windows composing almost the entire long wall opposite the fireplace being continually stirred by them. It was dusk, and candles had been lit in the sconces as well as in the several candelabra which stood on the various tables. The little tongues of flame flickered continually, causing the wax to melt unevenly, and making it impossible for one of the persons assembled in the Hall to set the stitches in her embroidery with any degree of accuracy. Having twice changed her seat to no purpose, she folded the work, and replaced it in a tapestry-bag, drawing forth, in its stead, a prosaic piece of knitting, with which she proceeded to occupy herself, in the manner of one prepared to make the best, without comment, of adverse conditions.

The furnishing of the Hall might have been taken as an example of the heterogeneous nature of the whole Castle, few of the pieces which it contained having been chosen with any nicety of judgement. A fine refectory table, pushed under the windows, and several carved oak chairs with wooden seats, were the only objects which bore any particular relation to their surroundings, the rest of the furniture consisting of pieces representative of every age and style, and including a modern and very ugly side-table, with a marble top, supported by brazen gryphons' heads. Two suits of armour of the surcoatless period guarded the entrance, and several shields, pikes, halberds, and gisarmes were arranged upon the wall above the high plaster mantelpiece. These were flanked by a full-length portrait of the late Earl,

leaning negligently with one leg crossed over the other, against the shoulder of his horse; and a fine Battle-piece, of which the most noticeable features were the arresting figure of the commanding officer in the foreground, and the smoke issuing in woolly balls from the mouths of innumerable cannons.

Only one of the five persons gathered round the fireplace in expectation of the Earl's arrival seemed to be conscious of the discomfort of her situation, and she made no complaint, merely shifting her chair so that the leaping flames should not scorch her face, and pinning her shawl securely across her shoulders to protect them from the cold blast from the vestibule. The Dowager Countess, regally enthroned in a wing-chair, with her feet upon a stool, was indifferent to draughts; neither her son, Martin, moodily standing before the fire, and kicking at a smouldering log, nor Mr Theodore Frant, engaged in snuffing a candle in the branch set in the centre of the refectory table, was aware of any unusual chilliness; and the Chaplain, seated at her ladyship's left hand, had long since become inured to the Spartan conditions prevailing at Stanyon, and had pronounced the gathering to be very snugly placed. This tribute earned him a gracious smile from the Dowager, who said that it had frequently been remarked that few fires gave out so fierce a heat as this one. She then desired Miss Morville, in a voice of mingled civility and condescension, to be so good as to run up to the Crimson Saloon, and to fetch from it a little hand-screen. Miss Morville at once laid aside her knitting, and departed on her errand; and, as though her absence released him from constraint, Martin looked up from his scowling scrutiny of the fire, and exclaimed: 'This is a curst business! I wish it were well over! Why must we kick our heels here, waiting on *his* pleasure? The lord knows we don't want him! I have a very good mind to ride over to eat my mutton with Barny!'

His cousin looked frowningly at him for a moment, but said nothing. Another candle needed attention, and he dealt with it methodically. He was a powerfully built man, nearing his thirtieth birthday, with a resolute, rather square countenance,

and a good deal of reserve in his manner. The cast of his features bore a certain resemblance to that of his young cousin's, but the likeness existed merely in the aquiline trend of the nose, the slightly heavy line of the jaw, and the set of the eyes under brows which overhung them enough to give a forbidding look to the face. The colour of his eyes was a clear, light grey, as cool and as inexpressive as lake-water; his mouth, with its firmly closed lips, betrayed no secrets, but seemed to show that its owner, besides possessing resolution of character, knew how to keep his own counsel. His address was good, and his manner had all the quiet assurance of his breeding.

With Martin, it was otherwise. Every change of mood was reflected in his eyes, so dark a brown as to appear almost black, and in the sensitive curves of his full mouth. Six years younger than his cousin, he had not altogether thrown off the boy; and, from having been the idol of his mother and the pet of his father, he was a good deal spoiled, impatient of restraint, thrown into the sulks by trifling causes, and into wild rages by obstacles to his plans. Treated from his earliest youth as though he, and not his half-brother, had been his father's heir, it was not to be expected that he could face with equanimity the succession of the seventh Earl. A vague belief that his brother would not survive the rigours of the campaign in Spain had fostered in him the unexplored thought that he would one day step into his father's shoes; the emergence of the seventh Earl, unscathed, from the war found him unprepared, and filled him, when his first shocked incredulity had passed, with a sense of burning resentment. He had only a slight recollection of the brother seven years his senior, his memory retaining little beyond the impression of a fair, quiet boy, with a gentle manner, and a very soft voice; but he was sure that he would dislike him. He said, with a defiant glance cast in the direction of his impassive cousin: 'I daresay it is past six o'clock already! When are we to dine? If he thinks to bring town ways to Stanyon, I for one won't bear it!'

'Do not put yourself about, my dear!' recommended his parent. 'Dinner must for this once await his convenience, but

with all his faults his disposition was always compliant. I assure you, I do not expect to find our style of living overset by any fashionable nonsense which he may have learned in Lady Penistone's establishment. *That* would not suit me at all, and I am not quite nobody at Stanyon, I believe!

This announcement, being plainly in the nature of a pleasantry, caused Mr Clowne to laugh a little, and to say: 'Indeed your ladyship is not nobody! Such a whimsical fancy must really quite startle anyone unacquainted with those flashes of wit *we* know so well!' He encountered a sardonic look from Theodore, and added hastily: 'How many years it is since I have had the pleasure of meeting his lordship! How much he will have to tell us of his experiences! I am sure we shall all hang upon his lips!'

'Hang upon his lips!' exclaimed Martin, with one of his fiery looks. 'Ay! toad-eat him to the top of his bent! *I* shall not do so! I wish he were underground!'

'Take care what you say!' interposed his cousin sternly.

Martin flushed, looking a little conscious, but said in a sullen tone: 'Well, I do wish it, but of course I don't mean anything! You need not be so quick to take me up!'

'Military anecdotes are never acceptable to me,' said the Dowager, as though the brief interchange between the cousins had not occurred. 'I have no intention of encouraging Desborough to enlarge upon his experiences in Spain. The reflections of a General must always be of value – though I fancy we have heard enough of the late war: those of a junior officer can only weary his auditors.'

'You need feel no alarm on that score, ma'am,' said Theodore. 'My cousin has not altered so much!'

This was uttered so dryly that the Chaplain felt himself impelled to step into a possible breach. 'Ah, Mr Theodore, you remind us that you are the only one amongst us who can claim to know his lordship! *You* have frequently been meeting him, while *we* –'

'I have met him occasionally,' interrupted Theodore. 'His

employment abroad has not made *frequent* meetings possible.'

'Just so – precisely as I was about to remark! But you know him well enough to have a kindness for him!'

'I have always had a great kindness for him, sir.'

The reappearance of Miss Morville, bearing a small fire-screen set upon an ebony stick, which she handed to the Dowager, created a timely diversion. The Dowager bestowed a smile upon her, saying that she was very much obliged to her. 'I do not know how I shall bear to relinquish you to your worthy parents when they return from the Lakes, for I am sure I shall miss you excessively. My daughter – Lady Grampound, you know – is for ever advising me to employ some genteel person to bear me company, and to run my little errands for me. If ever I should decide to do so I shall offer the post to *you*, I promise you!'

Miss Morville, not so swift as Mr Clowne to recognize her ladyship's wit, replied to this pleasantry in a practical spirit. 'Well, it is very kind in you to think you would like to have me to live with you, ma'am,' she said, 'but I do not think it would suit me, for I should not have nearly enough to do.'

'You like to be very busy, don't you?' Theodore said, smiling at her in some amusement.

'Yes,' she replied, seating herself again in her chair, and resuming her knitting. She added thoughtfully: 'It is to be hoped that I shall never be obliged to seek such a post, for my disposition is *not* meek, and would render me ineligible for any post but that, perhaps, of housekeeper.'

This prosaic observation appeared to daunt the company. A silence fell, which was broken by the ubiquitous Mr Clowne, who said archly: 'What do you think of, Miss Morville, while your hands are so busy? Or must we not seek to know?'

She looked rather surprised, but replied with the utmost readiness: 'I was wondering whether I should not, after all, make the foot a little longer. When they are washed at home, you know, they don't shrink; but it is sadly different at Cambridge! I should think the washerwomen there ought to be ashamed of themselves!'

Finding that this reflection evoked no response from the assembled company, she again applied herself to her work, and continued to be absorbed in it until Martin, who had quick ears, jerked up his head, and ejaculated: 'A carriage! At last!'

At the same moment, an added draught informed the initiated that the door beyond the Grand Stairway had been opened; there was a subdued noise of bustle in the vestibule, and the sound of trampling hooves in the carriage-drive. Miss Morville finished knitting her row, folded the sock, and bestowed it neatly in the tapestry-bag. Though Martin nervously fingered his cravat, the Dowager betrayed by no sign that she had heard the sounds of an arrival. Mr Clowne, taking his cue from her, lent a spuriously eager ear to the platitude which fell from her lips; and Theodore, glancing from one to the other, seemed to hesitate to put himself forward.

A murmur of voices from the vestibule indicated that Abney, the butler, had thrown open the doors to receive his new master. Several persons, including the steward, and a couple of footmen, were bowing, and falling back obsequiously; and in another instant a slim figure came into view. Only Miss Morville, seated in a chair with its back turned to the vestibule, was denied this first glimpse of the seventh Earl. Either from motives of good manners, or from lack of interest, she refrained from peeping round the back of her chair; and the Dowager, to mark her approbation, addressed another of her majestic platitudes to her.

All that could at first be seen of the seventh Earl was a classic profile, under the brim of a high-crowned beaver; a pair of gleaming Hessians, and a drab coat of many capes and graceful folds, which enveloped him from chin to ankle. His voice was heard: a soft voice, saying to the butler: 'Thank you! Yes, I remember you very well: you are Abney. And you, I think, must be my steward. Perran, is it not? I am very glad to see you again.'

He turned, as though aware of the eyes which watched him, and stood foursquare to the Hall, seeing his stepmother, her imposing form gowned in purple satin, a turban set upon her grey locks, her Roman nose elevated; his half-brother, standing

scowling before the fireplace, one hand gripping the high mantelshelf, the other dug into the pocket of his satin breeches; his cousin, standing a little in the background, and slightly smiling at him; his Chaplain, torn between curiosity and his allegiance to the Dowager. He regarded them thoughtfully, while with one hand he removed the beaver from his head, and held it out, and with the other he relinquished his gloves and his cane into the care of a footman. His hat was reverently taken from him by Abney, who murmured: 'Your coat, my lord!'

'My coat, yes: in a moment!' the Earl said, moving unhurriedly towards the Hall.

An instant Theodore hesitated, waiting for the Dowager or for Martin to make some sign; then he strode forward, with his hands held out, exclaiming: 'Gervase, my dear fellow! Welcome!'

Martin, his affronted stare taking in the number of the capes of that drab coat, the high polish on the Hessian boots, the extravagant points of a shirt-collar, and the ordered waves of guinea-gold hair above a white brow, muttered audibly: 'Good God! the fellow's nothing but a curst *dandy*!'

Two

The flicker of a quizzical look, cast in Martin's direction, betrayed that his half-brother had heard his involuntary exclamation. Before the ready flush had surged up to the roots of his hair, Gervase was no longer looking at him, but was shaking his cousin's hand, smiling at him, and saying: 'How do you do, Theo? You see, I *do* keep my promises: I have come!'

Theo held his slender hand an instant longer, pressing it slightly. 'One year past! You are a villain!'

'Ah, yes, but you see I must have gone into black gloves, and really I could not bring myself to do so!' He drew his hand away, and advanced into the Hall, towards his stepmother's chair.

She did not rise, but she extended her hand to him. 'Well, and so you have come at last, St Erth! I am happy to see you here, though, to be sure, I scarcely expected ever to do so! I do not know why you could not have come before, but you were always a strange, whimsical creature, and I daresay I shall not find that you have changed.'

'Dear ma'am, believe me, it is the greatest satisfaction to me to be able to perceive, at a glance, that *you* have not changed – not by so much as a hairsbreadth!' Gervase responded, bowing over her hand.

So sweetly were the words uttered, that everyone, except the Dowager, was left in doubt of their exact significance. The Dowager, who would have found it hard to believe that she could be the object of satire, was unmoved. 'No, I fancy I do not alter,'

she said complacently. 'No doubt, however, you see a great change in your brother.'

'A great change,' agreed Gervase, holding out his hand to Martin, and scanning him out of his smiling, blue eyes. 'Can you be my little brother? It seems so unlikely! I should not have recognized you.' He turned, offering hand and smile to the Chaplain. 'But Mr Clowne I must certainly have known anywhere! How do you do?'

The Chaplain, who, from the moment of the Earl's handing his hat to Abney, had stood staring at him as though he could not drag his eyes from his face, seemed to be a trifle shaken, and answered with much less than his usual urbanity: 'And I you, my lord! For one moment it was as though – Your lordship must forgive me! Memory serves one some strange tricks.'

'You mean, I think, that I am very like my mother,' said Gervase. 'I am glad – though it is a resemblance which has brought upon me in the past much that I wish to forget.'

'It has frequently been remarked,' stated the Dowager, 'that Martin is the very likeness of all the Frants.'

'You are too severe, ma'am,' said Gervase gently.

'Let me tell you, St Erth, that if I favour the Frants I am devilish glad to hear it!' said Martin.

'Tell me anything you wish, my dear Martin!' said Gervase encouragingly.

His young relative was not unnaturally smitten to silence, and stood glaring at him. The Dowager said in a voice of displeasure: 'I have the greatest dislike of such trifling talk as this. I shall make you known to Miss Morville, St Erth.'

Bows were exchanged; the Earl murmured that he was happy to make Miss Morville's acquaintance; and Miss Morville, accepting the civility with equanimity, pointed out to him, in a helpful spirit, that Abney was still waiting to relieve him of his driving-coat.

'Of course – yes!' said Gervase, allowing the butler to help him out of his coat, and standing revealed in all the fashionable elegance of dove-coloured pantaloons, and a silver-buttoned

coat of blue superfine. A quizzing-glass hung on a black riband round his neck, and he raised this to one eye, seeming to observe, for the first time, the knee-breeches worn by his brother and his cousin, and the glory of his stepmother's low-cut gown of purple satin. 'Oh, I am afraid I have kept you waiting for me!' he said apologetically. 'Now what is to be done? Will you permit me, ma'am, to sit down to dinner in all my dirt, or shall I change my clothes while your dinner spoils?'

'It would take you an hour, I daresay!' Martin remarked, with a curling lip.

'Oh, more than that!' replied Gervase gravely.

'I am not, in general, an advocate for a man's sitting down to dine in his walking-dress,' announced the Dowager. 'I consider such a practice slovenly, and slovenliness I abhor! In certain cases it may be thought, however, to be allowable. We will dine immediately, Abney.'

The Earl, taking up a position before the fire, beside his brother, drew a Sèvres snuff-box from his pocket, and, opening it with a dexterous flick of his thumb, took a pinch of the mixture it contained, and raised it to one nostril. An unusual signet-ring, which he wore, and which seemed, at one moment, dull and dark, and at another, when he moved his hand so that the ring caught the light, to glow with green fire, attracted his stepmother's attention. 'What is that ring you have upon your finger, St Erth?' she demanded. 'It appears to me to be a signet!'

'Why, so it is, ma'am!' he replied, raising his brows in mild surprise.

'How comes this about? Your father's ring was delivered to you by your cousin's hand I do not know how many months ago! *All* the Earls of St Erth have worn it, for five generations – I daresay more!'

'Yes, I prefer my own,' said the Earl tranquilly.

'Upon my word!' the Dowager ejaculated, her bosom swelling. 'I have not misunderstood you, I suppose! You prefer a trumpery ring of your own to an heirloom!'

'I wonder,' mused the Earl, pensively regarding his ring,

‘whether some Earl of St Erth as yet unborn – my great-great-grandson, perhaps – will be told the same, when he does not choose to wear this ring of mine?’

A high colour mounted to the Dowager’s cheeks; before she could speak, however, the matter-of-fact voice of Miss Morville made itself heard. ‘Very likely,’ she said. ‘Modes change, you know, and what one generation may admire another will frequently despise. My Mama, for instance, has a set of garnets which I consider quite hideous, and shan’t know what to do with, when they belong to me.’

‘Filial piety will not force you to wear them, Miss Morville?’

‘I shouldn’t think it would,’ she responded, giving the matter some consideration.

‘Your Mama’s garnets, my dear Drusilla – no doubt very pretty in their way! – can scarcely be compared to the Frant ring!’ said the Dowager. ‘I declare, when I hear St Erth saying that he prefers some piece of trumpery –’

‘No, no, I never said so!’ interrupted the Earl. ‘You really must not call it trumpery, my dear ma’am! A very fine emerald, cut to my order. I daresay you might never see just such another, for they are rare, you know. I am informed that there is considerable difficulty experienced in cutting them to form signets.’

‘I know nothing of such matters, but I am shocked – excessively shocked! Your father would have been very glad to have left his ring to Martin, let me tell you, only he thought it not right to leave it away from the heir!’

‘Was it indeed a personal bequest?’ enquired Gervase, interested. ‘That certainly must be held to enhance its value. It becomes, in fact, a curio, for it must be quite the only piece of unentailed property which my father did bequeathe to me. I shall put it in a glass cabinet.’

Martin, reddening, said: ‘I see what you are at! *I’m* not to be blamed if my father preferred me to you!’

‘No, you are to be felicitated,’ said Gervase.

‘My lord! Mr Martin!’ said the Chaplain imploringly.

Neither brother, hot brown eyes meeting cool blue ones, gave any sign of having heard him, but the uncomfortable interlude was brought to a close by the entrance of the butler, announcing that dinner was served.

There were two dining-rooms at Stanyon, one of which was only used when the family dined alone. Both were situated on the first floor of the Castle, at the end of the east wing, and were reached by way of the Grand Stairway, the Italian Saloon, and a broad gallery, known as the Long Drawing-room. Access to them was also to be had through two single doors, hidden by screens, but these led only to the precipitous stairs which descended to the kitchens. The family dining-room was rather smaller than the one used for formal occasions, but as its mahogany table was made to accommodate some twenty persons without crowding it seemed very much too large for the small party assembled in it. The Dowager established herself at the foot of the table, and directed her son and the Chaplain to the places laid on her either side. Martin, who had gone unthinkingly to the head of the table, recollected the change in his circumstances, muttered something indistinguishable, and moved away from it. The Dowager waved Miss Morville to the seat on the Earl's right; and Theodore took the chair opposite to her. Since the centre of the table supported an enormous silver epergne, presented to the Earl's grandfather by the East India Company, and composed of a temple, surrounded by palms, elephants, tigers, sepoy, and palanquins, tastefully if somewhat improbably arranged, the Earl and his stepmother were unable to see one another, and conversation between the two ends of the table was impossible. Nor did it flourish between neighbours, since the vast expanse of napery separating them gave them a sense of isolation it was difficult to overcome. The Dowager indeed, maintained, in her penetrating voice, a flow of very uninteresting small-talk, which consisted largely of exact explanations of the various relationships in which she stood to every one of the persons she mentioned; but conversation between St Erth, his cousin and Miss Morville was of a desultory

nature. By the time Martin had three times craned his neck to address some remark to Theo, obscured from his view by the epergne, the Earl had reached certain decisions which he lost no time in putting into force. No sooner had the Dowager borne Miss Morville away to the Italian Saloon than he said: 'Abney!'

'My lord?'

'Has this table any leaves?'

'It has many, my lord!' said the butler, staring at him.

'Remove them, if you please.'

'*Remove* them, my lord?'

'Not just at once, of course, but before I sit at the table again.

Also that thing?'

'The epergne, my lord?' Abney faltered. 'Where – where would your lordship desire it to be put?'

The Earl regarded it thoughtfully. 'A home question, Abney. Unless you know of a dark cupboard, perhaps, where it could be safely stowed away?'

'My mother,' stated Martin, ready for a skirmish, 'has a particular fondness for that piece!'

'How very fortunate!' returned St Erth. 'Do draw your chair to this end of the table, Martin! and you too, Mr Clowne! Abney, have the epergne conveyed to her ladyship's sitting-room!'

Theo looked amused, but said under his breath: 'Gervase, for God's sake – !'

'You will not have that thing put into my mother's room!' exclaimed Martin, a good deal startled.

'Don't you think she would like to have it? If she has a particular fondness for it, I should not wish to deprive her of it.'

'She will wish it to be left where it has always stood, and so I tell you! And if I know Mama,' he added, with relish, 'I'll wager that's what will happen!'

'Oh, I shouldn't do that!' Gervase said. 'You see, you don't know me, and it is never wise to bet against a dark horse.'

'I suppose that you think, just because you're St Erth now, that you may turn Stanyon upside down, if you choose!' growled Martin, a little nonplussed.

‘Well, yes,’ replied Gervase. ‘I do think it, but you must not let it distress you, for I really shan’t quite do that!’

‘We shall see what Mama has to say!’ was all Martin could think of to retort.

The Dowager’s comments, when the fell tidings were presently divulged to her, were at once comprehensive and discursive, and culminated in an unwise announcement that Abney would take his orders from his mistress.

‘Oh, I hope he will not!’ said Gervase. ‘I should be very reluctant to dismiss a servant who has been for so many years employed in the family!’ He smiled down into the Dowager’s astonished face, and added, in his gentle way: ‘But I have too great a dependence on your sense of propriety, ma’am, to suppose that you would issue any orders at Stanyon which ran counter to mine.’

Everyone but Miss Morville, who was studying the Fashion Notes in the latest Ladies’ periodical, waited with suspended breath for the climax to this engagement. They were disappointed, or relieved, according to their several dispositions, when the Dowager said, after a short silence, pregnant with passion: ‘You will do as you please in your own house, St Erth! Pray do not hesitate to inform me if you desire me to remove to the Dower House immediately!’

‘Ah, no! I should be sorry to see you do so, ma’am!’ replied Gervase. ‘Such a house as Stanyon would be a sad place without a mistress!’ Her face showed no sign of relenting, and he added, in a coaxing tone: ‘Do not be vexed with me! Must we quarrel? Indeed, I do not wish to stand upon bad terms with you!’

‘I can assure you that no quarrel between us will be of *my* seeking,’ said the Dowager austerely. ‘A very odd thing it would be if I were to be picking quarrels with my son-in-law! Pray be so good as to apprise me, in the future, of the arrangements which you desire to alter at Stanyon!’

‘Thank you!’ Gervase said, bowing.

The meekness in his voice made his cousin’s brows draw together a little; but Martin evidently considered that his mother

had lost the first bout, for he uttered a disgusted exclamation, and flung out of the room in something very like a tantrum.

The Dowager, ignoring, in a lofty spirit, the entire incident, then desired Theo to ring for a card-table to be set up, saying that she had no doubt St Erth would enjoy a rubber of whist. If Gervase did not look as though these plans for his entertainment were to his taste, his compliant disposition led him to acquiesce docilely in them, and, when a four was presently made up, to submit with equanimity to having his play ruthlessly criticized by his stepmother. His cousin and the Chaplain, after a little argument with Miss Morville, who, however, was resolute in refusing to take a hand, were the other two players; and the game was continued until the tea-tray was brought in at ten o'clock. The Dowager, who had maintained an unwearied commentary throughout on her own and the other three players' skill (or want of it), the fall of the cards, the rules which governed her play, illustrated by maxims laid down by her father which gave Gervase a very poor opinion of that deceased nobleman's mental ability, then stated that no one would care to begin another rubber, and rose from the table, and disposed herself in her favourite chair beside the fire. Miss Morville dispensed tea and coffee, a circumstance which made the Earl wonder if she were, after all, one of his stepmother's dependents. At first glance, he had assumed her to be perhaps a poor relation, or a hired companion; but since the Dowager treated her, if not with any distinguishing attention, at least with perfect civility, he had come to the conclusion that she must be a guest at Stanyon. He was not well versed in the niceties of female costume, but it seemed to him that she was dressed with propriety, and even a certain quiet elegance. Her gown, which was of white sarsnet, with a pink body, and long sleeves, buttoned tightly round her wrists, was unadorned by the frills of lace or knots of floss with which young ladies of fashion usually embellished their dresses. On the other hand, it was cut low across her plump bosom, in a way which would scarcely have been tolerated in a hired companion; and she wore a very pretty ornament suspended on a

gold chain round her throat. Nor was there any trace of obsequiousness in her manners. She inaugurated no conversation, but when she was addressed she answered with composure, and readily. A pink riband, threaded through them, kept her neat curls in place. These were mouse-coloured, and very simply arranged. Her countenance was pleasing without being beautiful, her best feature being a pair of dark eyes, well opened and straight-gazing. Her figure was trim, but sadly lacking in height, and she was rather short-necked. She employed no arts to attract; the Earl thought her dull.

Family prayers succeeded tea, after which the Dowager withdrew with Miss Morville, charging Theo to conduct St Erth to his bedchamber. 'Not,' she said magnanimously, 'that I wish to dictate to you when you should go to bed, for I am sure you may do precisely as you wish, but no doubt you are tired after your journey.'

It did not seem probable that a journey of fifty miles (for the Earl had travelled to Stanyon only from Penistone Hall), in a luxurious chaise, could exhaust a man inured to the rigours of an arduous campaign, but Gervase agreed to it with his usual amiability, bade his stepmother good night, and tucked a hand in Theo's arm, saying: 'Well, lead me to bed! Where have they put me?'

'In your father's room, of course.'

'Oh dear! *Must I*?'

Theo smiled. 'Do my aunt the justice to own that to have allotted any other room to you would have been quite improper!'

The Earl's bedchamber, which lay in the main, or Tudor, part of the Castle, was a vast apartment, rendered sombre by dark panelling, and crimson draperies. However, several branches of candles had been carried into the room, and a bright fire was burning in the stone hearth. A neat individual, bearing on his person the unmistakable stamp of the gentleman's gentleman, was awaiting his master there, and had already laid out his night-gear.

'Sit down, Theo!' said St Erth. 'Turvey, tell someone to send up the brandy, and glasses!'

The valet bowed, but said: ‘Anticipating that your lordship would wish it, I have already procured it from the butler. Allow me, my lord, to pull off your boots!’

The Earl seated himself, and stretched out one leg. His valet, on one knee before him, drew off the Hessian, handling it with loving care, and casting an anxious eye over its shining black surface to detect a possible scratch. He could find none, and, with a sigh of relief, drew off the second boot, and set both down delicately side by side. He then assisted the Earl to take off his close-fitting coat, and held up for him to put on a frogged and padded dressing-gown of brocaded silk. The Earl ripped the intricately tied cravat from about his throat, tossed it aside, and nodded dismissal. ‘Thank you! I will ring when I am ready for you to come back to me.’

The valet bowed, and withdrew, bearing with him the cherished boots. St Erth poured out two glasses of brandy, gave one to his cousin, and sank into a deep chair on the other side of the fire. Theo, who had blinked at the magnificence of the dressing-gown, openly laughed at him, and said: ‘I think you must have joined the dandy-set, Gervase!’

‘Yes, so Martin seemed to think also,’ agreed Gervase, rolling the brandy round his glass.

‘Oh – ! You heard that, then?’

‘Was I not meant to hear it?’

‘I don’t know.’ Theo was silent for a moment, looking into the fire, but presently he raised his eyes to his cousin’s face, and said abruptly: ‘He resents you, Gervase.’

‘That has been made plain to me – but not why.’

‘Is the reason so hard to seek? You stand between him and the Earldom.’

‘But, my dear Theo, so I have always done! I am not a lost heir, returning to oust him from a position he thought his own!’

‘Not lost, but I fancy he did think the position might well be his,’ Theo replied.

‘He seems to me an excessively foolish young man, but he

cannot be such a saphead as that!’ expostulated Gervase. ‘Only I could succeed to my father’s room!’

‘Very true, but dead men do not succeed,’ said Theo dryly.

‘Dead men!’ Gervase exclaimed, startled and amused.

‘My dear Gervase, you have taken part in more than one engagement, and you will own that it could not have been thought surprising had you met your end upon a battlefield. It was, in fact, considered to be a likely contingency.’

‘And one that was hoped for?’

‘Yes, one that was hoped for.’

The Earl’s face was inscrutable; after a moment, Theo said: ‘I have shocked you, but it is better to be plain with you, I think. You cannot have supposed that they loved you!’

‘Not Lady St Erth, no! But Martin – !’

‘Why should he? He has heard no good of you from my uncle, or from his mother; he has been treated in all things as though he had been the heir; so much indulged and petted – well, talking pays no toll, or there is much I could say to you! To him, you are a usurper.’

Gervase finished his brandy, and set down the glass. ‘I see. It is melancholy indeed! Something tells me that I shall not be at Stanyon for very long.’

‘What do you mean?’ Theo said sharply.

Gervase looked at him, a little bewildered. ‘Why, what should I mean?’

‘Martin is rash – his temper is uncontrollable, but he would not murder you, Gervase!’

‘Murder me! Good God, I should hope he would not!’ exclaimed the Earl, laughing. ‘No, no, I only meant that I think I should prefer to live at Maplefield, or Studham – ah, no! Studham was not entailed, was it? It belongs to Martin!’

‘Yes, it belongs to Martin, along with the Jamaican property,’ said Theo grimly. ‘And your mother-in-law has the London house and the Dower House for the term of her life!’

‘I grudge her neither,’ replied the Earl lightly.

‘When I can bring you to pay a little heed to the way in which

things are left, you may well grudge the pair of them a great deal of what they now stand possessed!’ retorted Theo. ‘I have sometimes thought that my uncle had taken leave of his senses! You have me to thank for it that the estate is not cut up even more!’

‘I think I have you to thank for more than you would have me guess,’ St Erth said, smiling across at him. ‘You have been a good friend to me, Theo, and I thank you for it.’

‘Well, I have done what lay in my power to keep the property intact,’ Theo said gruffly. ‘But I am determined you shall be made to attend to your affairs, and so I warn you!’

‘What a fierce fellow you are, to be sure! But you wrong me, you know! I did read my father’s will, and I fancy I know pretty well how things stand.’

‘Then I wonder that you will be so expensive, Gervase!’ said Theo forthrightly. ‘The charges you have made upon the estate this past twelvemonth –!’

‘Oh, won’t it bear them? I shall be obliged to marry an heiress!’

‘I wish you will be serious! Things have not come to such a pass as that, but you will do well to be a little more careful. When I have shown you how matters stand, I hope you may be persuaded to take up your residence here. It will not do to leave Stanyon masterless, you know.’

‘Stanyon has a very good master in you, I fancy.’

‘Nonsense! I am nothing but your agent.’

‘But I should find it a dead bore!’ objected Gervase. ‘Only consider the dreadful evening I have spent already! I have not the remotest guess where Martin went to, but I am sure he was not to be blamed for his flight. I wish I had had the courage to follow his example! And who, pray, is that little squab of a female? Was she invited for my entertainment? Don’t tell me she is an heiress! I could not – no, I really *could* not be expected to pay my addresses to anyone with so little countenance or conversation!’

‘Drusilla! No, no, nothing of that sort!’ smiled Theo. ‘I fancy

my aunt thinks she would make a very suitable wife for me!

‘My poor Theo!’

‘Oh, she is a very good sort of a girl, after all! But my tastes do not run in that direction. She is a guest at Stanyon merely while her parents are visiting in the north. They live at Gilbourne: in fact, they are your tenants. Her ladyship has a kindness for Drusilla, which is not wonderful, for she is always very obliging, and her lack of countenance, as you have it, makes it in the highest degree unlikely that she will ever be a danger to Lady St Erth’s schemes for Martin.’ He rose from his chair, and added, glancing down at the Earl: ‘We can offer you better entertainment, I hope! There is the hunting, remember, and your coverts should afford you excellent sport.’

‘My dear Theo, I may have been abroad for a few years, but I *was* reared in England, you know!’ expostulated Gervase. ‘If you will tell me *what* I am to hunt, or shoot, at this moment – !’

Theo laughed. ‘Wood-pigeons!’

‘Yes, and rabbits. I thank you!’

‘Well, you will go to London for the Season, I daresay.’

‘You may say so with the fullest confidence.’

‘I see it is useless for me to waste my eloquence upon you. Only remain at Stanyon for long enough to understand in what case you stand, and I must be satisfied! Tomorrow, I give you warning, I shall make you attend to business. I won’t tease you any more tonight, however. Sleep sound!’

‘I hope I may, but I fear my surroundings may give me a nightmare. Where are you quartered, Theo?’

‘Oh, in the Tower! It has come to be considered my particular domain. My bedchamber is above the muniment room, you know.’

‘A day’s march to reach you! It must be devilish uncomfortable!’

‘On the contrary, it suits me very well. I am able to fancy myself in a house of my own, and can enter the Tower by the door into the Chapel Court, if I choose, and so escape being commanded to furnish my aunt with the details of where I have been, or where I am going!’

‘Good God! Will it be my fate to endure such examinations?’

‘My aunt,’ said Theo, with a lurking twinkle, ‘likes to know all that one does, and why one does it.’

‘You terrify me! I shall certainly not remain at Stanyon above a week!’

But his cousin only smiled, and shook his head, and left him to ring for his valet.

When the man came, he brought with him a can of hot water, and a warming-pan. The Earl, staring at this, said: ‘Now, what in thunder are you about?’

‘It appears, my lord,’ responded Turvey, in a voice carefully devoid of expression, ‘that extremely early hours are kept in this house – or, as I apprehend I should say, Castle. The servants have already gone to bed, and your lordship would hardly desire to get between cold sheets.’

‘Thank you, my constitution is really not so sickly as you must think it! Next you will bring me laudanum, as a composer! Set the thing down in the hearth, and don’t be so foolish again, if you please! Have they housed you comfortably?’

‘I make no complaint, my lord. I collect that the Castle is of considerable antiquity.’

‘Yes, parts of it date back to the fourteenth century,’ said the Earl, stripping off his shirt. ‘It was moated once, but the lake is now all that remains of the moat.’

‘That, my lord,’ said Turvey, relieving him of his shirt, ‘would no doubt account for the prevailing atmosphere of damp.’

‘Very likely!’ retorted Gervase. ‘I infer that Stanyon does not meet with your approval!’

‘I am sure, a most interesting pile, my lord. Possibly one becomes inured to the inconvenience of being obliged to pass through three galleries and seven doors on one’s way to your lordship’s room.’

‘Oh!’ said the Earl, a trifle disconcerted. ‘It would certainly be better that you should be quartered rather nearer to me.’

‘I was alluding, my lord, to the position of the Servants’ Hall. To reach your lordship’s room from my own, it will be necessary

for me to descend two separate stairways, to pass down three corridors; through a door permitting access to one of the galleries with which the Castle appears to be – if I may say so! – somewhat profusely provided; and, by way of an antechamber, or vestibule, reach the court round which this portion of the Castle was erected.’ He waited for these measured words to sink into his master’s brain, and then added, in soothing accents: ‘Your lordship need have no fear, however, that I shall fail to bring your shaving-water in the morning. I have desired one of the under-footmen – a very obliging lad – to act as my guide until I am rather more conversant with my surroundings.’ He paused. ‘Or, perhaps I should say, until your lordship decides to return to London!’