

One

The company, ushered by a disapproving butler into the yellow saloon of Sir Richard Wyndham's house in St James's Square, comprised two ladies and one reluctant gentleman. The gentleman, who was not much above thirty years of age, but sadly inclined to fat, seemed to feel the butler's disapproval, for upon that dignified individual's informing the elder of the two ladies that Sir Richard was not at home, he cast a deprecating glance at him, not in the least the glance of a peer of the realm upon a menial, but an age-old look of one helpless man to another, and said in a pleading tone: 'Well, then, don't you think, Lady Wyndham – ? Louisa, hadn't we better – ? I mean, no use going in, my love, is there?'

Neither his wife nor his mother-in-law paid any attention to this craven speech. 'If my brother is gone out, we will await his return,' said Louisa briskly.

'Your poor Papa was always out when one wanted him,' complained Lady Wyndham. 'It is very affecting to me to see Richard growing every day more like him.'

Her fading accents were so lachrymose that it seemed probable that she would dissolve into tears upon her son's doorstep. George, Lord Trevor, was uneasily aware of a handkerchief, clutched in one thin, gloved hand, and put forward no further objection to entering the house in the wake of the two ladies.

Declining all offers of refreshment, Lady Trevor escorted her parent into the Yellow Saloon, settled her comfortably upon a

satin sofa, and announced her intention of remaining in St James's Square all day, if need be. George, with a very clear idea, born of sympathy, of what would be his brother-in-law's emotions upon returning to his residence to find a family deputation in possession of it, said unhappily: 'You know, I don't think we should, really I don't! I don't like it above half. I wish you would drop this notion you've taken into your heads.'

His wife, who was engaged in stripping off her lavender-kid gloves, threw him a look of indulgent contempt. 'My dear George, if *you* are afraid of Richard, let me assure you that *I* am not.'

'Afraid of him! No, indeed! But I wish you will consider that a man of nine-and-twenty won't relish having his affairs meddled with. Besides, he will very likely wonder what the deuce it has to do with me, and I'm sure I can't tell him! I wish I had not come.'

Louisa ignored this remark, considering it unworthy of being replied to, which indeed it was, since she ruled her lord with a rod of iron. She was a handsome woman, with a great deal of decision in her face, and a leavening gleam of humour. She was dressed, not perhaps in the height of fashion, which decreed that summer gauzes must reveal every charm of a lady's body, but with great elegance and propriety. Since she had a very good figure, the prevailing mode for high-waisted dresses, with low-cut bodices, and tiny puff-sleeves, became her very well: much better, in fact, than skin-tight pantaloons and a long-tailed coat became her husband.

Fashion was not kind to George. He looked his best in buckskin breeches and top-boots, but he was unfortunately addicted to dandyism, and pained his friends and relatives by adopting every extravagance of dress, spending as much time over the arrangement of his cravat as Mr Brummell himself, and squeezing his girth into tight stays which had a way of creaking whenever he moved unwarily.

The third member of the party, reclining limply on the satin sofa, was a lady with quite as much determination as her daughter, and a far more subtle way of getting her wishes

attended to. A widow of ten years' standing, Lady Wyndham enjoyed the frailest health. The merest hint of opposition was too much for the delicate state of her nerves; and anyone, observing her handkerchief, her vinaigrette, and the hartshorn which she usually kept by her, would have had to be stupid indeed to have failed to appreciate their sinister message. In youth, she had been a beauty; in middle age, everything about her seemed to have faded: hair, cheeks, eyes, and even her voice, which was plaintive, and so gentle that it was a wonder it ever made itself heard. Like her daughter, Lady Wyndham had excellent taste in dress, and since she was fortunate enough to possess a very ample jointure she was able to indulge her liking for the most expensive fal-lals of fashion without in any way curtailing her other expenses. This did not prevent her from thinking herself very badly off, but she was able to enjoy many laments over her straitened circumstances without feeling the least real pinch of poverty, and to win the sympathy of her acquaintances by dwelling sadly on the injustice of her late husband's will, which had placed his only son in the sole possession of his immense fortune. The jointure, her friends deduced hazily, was the veriest pittance.

Lady Wyndham, who lived in a charming house in Clarges Street, could never enter the mansion in St James's Square without suffering a pang. It was not, as might have been supposed from the look of pain she always cast upon it, a family domicile, but had been acquired by her son only a couple of years before. During Sir Edward's lifetime, the family had lived in a much larger, and most inconvenient house in Grosvenor Square. Upon Sir Richard's announcement that he proposed to set up an establishment of his own, this had been given up, so that Lady Wyndham had been able ever since to mourn its loss without being obliged to suffer any longer its inconveniences. But however much she might like her own house in Clarges Street it was not to be supposed that she could bear with equanimity her son's inhabiting a far larger house in St James's Square; and when every other source of grievance failed her, she

always came back to that, and said, as she said now, in an ill-used voice: 'I cannot conceive what he should want with a house like this!'

Louisa, who had a very good house of her own, besides an estate in Berkshire, did not in the least grudge her brother his mansion. She replied: 'It doesn't signify, Mama. Except that he must have been thinking of marriage when he bought it. Would you not say so, George?'

George was flattered at being thus appealed to, but he was an honest, painstaking person, and he could not bring himself to say that he thought Richard had had any thought of marriage in his head, either when he had bought the house, or at any other time.

Louisa was displeased. 'Well!' she said, looking resolute, 'he must be brought to think of marriage!'

Lady Wyndham lowered her smelling-salts to interpolate: 'Heaven knows I would never urge my boy to do anything distasteful, but it has been an understood thing for years that he and Melissa Brandon would seal the long friendship between our families with the Nuptial Tie!'

George goggled at her, and wished himself elsewhere.

'If he doesn't wish to marry Melissa, I'm sure I should be the last person to press her claim,' said Louisa. 'But it is high time that he married someone, and if he has no other suitable young female in his eye, Melissa it must be.'

'I do not know how to face Lord Saar,' bemoaned Lady Wyndham, raising the vinaigrette to her nose again. 'Or poor dear Emily, with three girls besides Melissa to dispose of, and none of them more than passable. Sophia has spots, too.'

'I do not consider Augusta hopeless,' said Louisa fairly. 'Amelia, too, may improve.'

'Squints!' said George.

'A slight cast in one eye,' corrected Louisa. 'However, we are not concerned with that. Melissa is an extremely handsome creature. No one can deny *that!*'

'And such a desirable connection!' sighed Lady Wyndham. 'Quite one of the best families!'

‘They tell me Saar won’t last another five years, not at the rate he’s going now,’ said George. ‘Everything mortgaged up to the hilt, and Saar drinking himself into his grave! They say his father did the same.’

Both ladies regarded him with disfavour. ‘I hope, George, you do not mean to imply that Melissa is addicted to the bottle?’ said his wife.

‘Oh no, no! Lord, no, I never thought of such a thing! I’m sure she’s an excellent young woman. But this I will say, Louisa: I don’t blame Richard if he don’t want her!’ said George defiantly. ‘Myself, I’d as soon marry a statue!’

‘I must say,’ conceded Louisa, ‘she is a trifle cold, perhaps. But it is a very delicate position for her, you’ll allow. It has been understood since both were children that she and Richard would make a match of it, and *she* knows that as well as *we* do. And here is Richard, behaving in the most odious way! I am out of all patience with him!’

George rather liked his brother-in-law, but he knew that it would be foolhardy to defend him, so he held his peace. Lady Wyndham took up the tale of woe. ‘Heaven forbid that I should force my only son to a disagreeable marriage, but I live in hourly dread of his bringing home some dreadful, low-born creature on his arm, and expecting me to welcome her!’

A vision of his brother-in-law crossed George’s mind’s eye. He said doubtfully: ‘Really, you know, I don’t think he’ll do that, ma’am.’

‘George is quite right,’ announced Louisa. ‘I should think the better of Richard if he did. It quite shocks me to see him so impervious to every feminine charm! It is a great piece of nonsense for him to dislike the opposite sex, but one thing is certain: dislike females he may, but he owes a duty to the name, and marry he must! I am sure I have been at pains to introduce him to every eligible young woman in town, for I am by no means set on his marrying Melissa Brandon. Well! He would not look twice at any of them, so if that is the mind he is in, Melissa will suit him very well.’

‘Richard thinks they all want him for his money,’ ventured George.

‘I dare say they may. What has that to say to anything, pray? I imagine you do not mean to tell me that Richard is romantic!’

No, George was forced to admit that Richard was not romantic.

‘If I live to see him suitably married, I can die content!’ said Lady Wyndham, who had every expectation of living for another thirty years. ‘His present course fills my poor mother’s heart with foreboding!’

Loyalty forced George to expostulate. ‘No, really, ma’am! Really, I say! There’s no harm in Richard, not the least in the world, ’pon my honour!’

‘He puts me out of all patience!’ said Louisa. ‘I love him dearly, but I despise him with all my heart! Yes, I do, and I do not care who hears me say so! He cares for nothing but the set of his cravat, the polish on his boots, and the blending of his snuff!’

‘His horses!’ begged George unhappily.

‘Oh, his horses! Very well! Let us admit him to be a famous whip! He beat Sir John Lade in their race to Brighton! A fine achievement indeed!’

‘Very handy with his fives!’ gasped George, sinking but game.

‘*You* may admire a man for frequenting Jackson’s Saloon, and Cribb’s Parlour! *I* do not!’

‘No, my love,’ George said. ‘No, indeed, my love!’

‘And I make no doubt you see nothing reprehensible in his addiction to the gaming-table! But I had it on the most excellent authority that he dropped three thousand pounds at one sitting at Almack’s!’

Lady Wyndham moaned, and dabbed at her eyes. ‘Oh, do not say so!’

‘Yes, but he’s so devilish wealthy it can’t signify!’ said George.

‘Marriage,’ said Louisa, ‘will put a stop to such fripperies.’

The depressing picture this dictum conjured up reduced George to silence. Lady Wyndham said, in a voice dark with mystery: ‘Only a mother could appreciate my anxieties. He is at

a dangerous age, and I live from day to day in dread of what he may do!’

George opened his mouth, encountered a look from his wife, shut it again, and tugged unhappily at his cravat.

The door opened; a Corinthian stood upon the threshold, cynically observing his relatives. ‘A thousand apologies,’ said the Corinthian, bored but polite. ‘Your very obedient servant, ma’am. Louisa, yours! My poor George! Ah – was I expecting you?’

‘Apparently not!’ retorted Louisa, bristling.

‘No, you weren’t. I mean, they took it into their heads – I couldn’t stop them!’ said George heroically.

‘I thought I was not,’ said the Corinthian, closing the door, and advancing into the room. ‘But my memory, you know, my lamentable memory!’

George, running an experienced eye over his brother-in-law, felt his soul stir. ‘B’gad, Richard, I like that! That’s a devilish well-cut coat, ’pon my honour, it is! Who made it?’

Sir Richard lifted an arm, and glanced at his cuff. ‘Weston, George, only Weston.’

‘George!’ said Louisa awfully.

Sir Richard smiled faintly, and crossed the room to his mother’s side. She held out her hand to him, and he bowed over it with languid grace, just brushing it with his lips. ‘A thousand apologies, ma’am!’ he repeated. ‘I trust my people have looked after you – er – *all* of you?’ His lazy glance swept the room. ‘Dear me!’ he said. ‘George, you are near to it: oblige me, my dear fellow, by pulling the bell!’

‘We do not need any refreshment, I thank you, Richard,’ said Louisa.

The faint, sweet smile silenced her as none of her husband’s expostulations had ever done. ‘My dear Louisa, you mistake – I assure you, you mistake! George is in the most urgent need of – er – stimulant. Yes, Jeffries, I rang. The Madeira – oh, ah! and some ratafia, Jeffries, if you please!’

‘Richard, that’s the best Waterfall I’ve ever seen!’ exclaimed

George, his admiring gaze fixed on the intricate arrangement of the Corinthian's cravat.

'You flatter me, George; I fear you flatter me.'

'Pshaw!' snapped Louisa.

'Precisely, my dear Louisa,' agreed Sir Richard amiably.

'Do not try to provoke me, Richard!' said Louisa, on a warning note. 'I will allow your appearance to be everything that it should be – admirable, I am sure!'

'One does one's poor best,' murmured Sir Richard.

Her bosom swelled. 'Richard, I could hit you!' she declared.

The smile grew, allowing her a glimpse of excellent white teeth. 'I don't think you could, my dear.'

George so far forgot himself as to laugh. A quelling glance was directed upon him. 'George, be quiet!' said Louisa.

'I must say,' conceded Lady Wyndham, whose maternal pride could not quite be overborne, 'there is no one, except Mr Brummell, of course, who looks as well as you do, Richard.'

He bowed, but he did not seem to be unduly elated by this encomium. Possibly he took it as his due. He was a very notable Corinthian. From his Wind-swept hair (most difficult of all styles to achieve), to the toes of his gleaming Hessians, he might have posed as an advertisement for the Man of Fashion. His fine shoulders set off a coat of superfine cloth to perfection; his cravat, which had excited George's admiration, had been arranged by the hands of a master; his waistcoat was chosen with a nice eye; his biscuit-coloured pantaloons showed not one crease; and his Hessians, with their jaunty gold tassels, had not only been made for him by Hoby, but were polished, George suspected, with a blacking mixed with champagne. A quizzing-glass on a black ribbon hung round his neck; a fob at his waist; and in one hand he carried a Sèvres snuffbox. His air proclaimed his unutterable boredom, but no tailoring, no amount of studied nonchalance, could conceal the muscle in his thighs, or the strength of his shoulders. Above the starched points of his shirt-collar, a weary, handsome face showed its owner's disillusionment. Heavy lids drooped over grey eyes which were intelligent enough, but only

to observe the vanities of the world; the smile which just touched that resolute mouth seemed to mock the follies of Sir Richard's fellow men.

Jeffries came back into the room with a tray, and set it upon a table. Louisa waved aside the offer of refreshment, but Lady Wyndham accepted it, and George, emboldened by his mother-in-law's weakness, took a glass of Madeira.

'I dare say,' said Louisa, 'that you are wondering what we are here for.'

'I never waste my time in idle speculation,' replied Sir Richard gently. 'I feel sure that you are going to tell me what you are here for.'

'Mama and I have come to speak to you about your marriage,' said Louisa, taking the plunge.

'And what,' enquired Sir Richard, 'has George come to speak to me about?'

'That too, of course!'

'No, I haven't!' disclaimed George hurriedly. 'You know I said I'd have nothing to do with it! I never wanted to come at all!'

'Have some more Madeira,' said Sir Richard soothingly.

'Well, thank you, yes, I will. But don't think I'm here to badger you about something which don't concern me, because I'm not!'

'Richard!' said Lady Wyndham deeply, 'I dare no longer meet Saar face to face!'

'As bad as that, is he?' said Sir Richard. 'I haven't seen him myself these past few weeks, but I'm not at all surprised. I fancy I heard something about it, from someone – I forget whom. Taken to brandy, hasn't he?'

'Sometimes,' said Lady Wyndham, 'I think you are utterly devoid of sensibility!'

'He is merely trying to provoke you, Mama. You know perfectly well what Mama means, Richard. When do you mean to offer for Melissa?'

There was a slight pause. Sir Richard set down his empty wine glass, and flicked with one long finger the petals of a flower

in a bowl on the table. ‘This year, next year, sometime – or never, my dear Louisa.’

‘I am very sure she considers herself as good as plighted to you,’ Louisa said.

Sir Richard was looking down at the flower under his hand, but at this he raised his eyes to his sister’s face, in an oddly keen, swift look. ‘Is that so?’

‘How should it be otherwise? You know very well that Papa and Lord Saar designed it so years ago.’

The lids veiled his eyes again. ‘How medieval of you!’ sighed Sir Richard.

‘Now, don’t, pray, take me up wrongly, Richard! If you don’t like Melissa, there is no more to be said. But you do like her – or if you don’t, at least *I* never heard you say so! What Mama and I feel – and George, too – is that it is time and more that you were settled in life.’

A pained glance reproached Lord Trevor. ‘*Et tu, Brute?*’ said Sir Richard.

‘I swear I never said so!’ declared George, choking over his Madeira. ‘It was all Louisa. I dare say I may have agreed with her. *You* know how it is, Richard!’

‘I know,’ agreed Sir Richard, sighing. ‘You too, Mama?’

‘Oh Richard, I live only to see you happily married, with your children about you!’ said Lady Wyndham, in trembling tones.

A slight, unmistakable shudder ran through the Corinthian. ‘My children about me . . . Yes. Precisely, ma’am. Pray continue!’

‘You owe it to the name,’ pursued his mother. ‘You are the last of the Wyndhams, for it’s not to be supposed that your Uncle Lucius will marry at this late date. There is Melissa, dear girl, the very wife for you! So handsome, so distinguished – birth, breeding: everything of the most desirable!’

‘Ah – your pardon, ma’am, but do you include Saar, and Cedric, not to mention Beverley, under that heading?’

‘That’s exactly what I say!’ broke in George. ‘“It’s all very well,” I said, “and if a man likes to marry an iceberg it’s all one

to me, but you can't call Saar a desirable father-in-law, damme if you can! While as for the girl's precious brothers," I said, "they'll ruin Richard inside a year!"

'Nonsense!' said Louisa. 'It is understood, of course, that Richard would make handsome settlements. But as for his being responsible for Cedric's and Beverley's debts, I'm sure I know of no reason why he should!'

'You comfort me, Louisa,' said Sir Richard.

She looked up at him not unaffectionately. 'Well, I think it is time to be frank, Richard. People will be saying next that you are playing fast and loose with Melissa, for you must know the understanding between you is an open secret. If you had chosen to marry someone else, five, ten years ago, it would have been a different thing. But so far as I am aware your affections have never even been engaged, and here you are, close on thirty, as good as pledged to Melissa Brandon, and nothing settled!'

Lady Wyndham, though in the fullest agreement with her daughter, was moved at this point to defend her son, which she did by reminding Louisa that Richard was only twenty-nine after all.

'Mama, Richard will be thirty in less than six months. For I,' said Louisa with resolution, 'am turned thirty-one.'

'Louisa, I am touched!' said Sir Richard. 'Only the deepest sisterly devotion, I am persuaded, could have wrung from you such an admission.'

She could not repress a smile, but said with as much severity as she could muster: 'It is no laughing matter. You are no longer in your first youth, and you know as well as I do that it is your duty to think seriously of marriage.'

'Strange,' mused Sir Richard, 'that one's duty should be invariably so disagreeable.'

'I know,' said George, heaving a sigh. 'Very true! Very true indeed!'

'Pooh! nonsense! What a coil you make of a simple matter!' Louisa said. 'Now, if I were to press you to marry some romantical miss, always wanting you to make love to her, and

crying her eyes out every time you chose to seek your amusements out of her company, you might have reason to complain. But Melissa – yes, an iceberg, George, if you like, and what else, pray, is Richard? – Melissa, I say, will never plague you in *that* way.’

Sir Richard’s eyes dwelled inscrutably upon her face for a moment. Then he moved to the table and poured himself out another glass of Madeira.

Louisa said defensively: ‘Well, you don’t *wish* her to cling about your neck, I suppose?’

‘Not at all.’

‘And you are not in love with any other woman, are you?’

‘I am not.’

‘Very well, then! To be sure, if you were in the habit of falling in and out of love, it would be a different matter. But, to be plain with you, you are the coldest, most indifferent, selfish creature alive, Richard, and you will find in Melissa an admirable partner.’

Inarticulate clucking sounds from George, indicative of protest, caused Sir Richard to wave a hand towards the Madeira. ‘Help yourself, George, help yourself!’

‘I must say, I think it most unkind in you to speak to your brother like that,’ said Lady Wyndham. ‘Not but what you *are* selfish, dear Richard. I’m sure I have said so over and over again. But so it is with the greater part of the world! Everywhere one turns one meets with nothing but ingratitude!’

‘If I have done Richard an injustice, I will willingly ask his pardon,’ said Louisa.

‘Very handsomely said, my dear sister. You have done me no injustice. I wish you will not look so distressed, George: your pity is quite wasted on me, I assure you. Tell me, Louisa: have you reason to suppose that Melissa expects me to – er – pay my addresses to her?’

‘Certainly I have. She has been expecting it any time these five years!’

Sir Richard looked a little startled. ‘Poor girl!’ he said. ‘I must have been remarkably obtuse.’

His mother and sister exchanged glances. 'Does that mean that you will think seriously of marriage?' asked Louisa.

He looked thoughtfully down at her. 'I suppose it must come to that.'

'Well, for my part,' said George, defying his wife, 'I would look around me for some other eligible female! Lord, there are dozens of 'em littering town! Why, I've seen I don't know how many setting their caps at you! Pretty ones, too, but you never notice them, you ungrateful dog!'

'Oh yes, I do,' said Sir Richard, with a curl of the lips.

'*Must* George be vulgar?' asked Lady Wyndham tragically.

'Be quiet, George! And as for you, Richard, I consider it in the highest degree nonsensical for you to take up that attitude. There is no denying that you're the biggest catch on the Marriage Mart – Yes, Mama, that is vulgar too, and I beg your pardon – but you have a lower opinion of yourself than I credit you with if you can suppose that your fortune is the only thing about you which makes you a desirable *parti*. You are generally accounted handsome – indeed, no one, I believe, could deny that your person is such as must please; and when you will take the trouble to be conciliating there is nothing in your manners to disgust the nicest taste.'

'This encomium, Louisa, almost unmans me,' said Sir Richard, much moved.

'I am perfectly serious. I was about to add that you often spoil everything by your odd humours. I do not know how you should expect to engage a female's affection when you never bestow the least distinguishing notice upon any woman! I do not say that you are uncivil, but there is a languor, a reserve in your manner, which must repel a woman of sensibility.'

'I am a hopeless case indeed,' said Sir Richard.

'If you want to know what I think, which I do not suppose you do, so you need not tell me so, it is that you are spoilt, Richard. You have too much money, you have done everything you wished to do before you are out of your twenties; you have been courted by match-making Mamas, fawned on by toadies, and

indulged by all the world. The end of it is that you are bored to death. There! I have said it, and though you may not thank me for it, you will admit that I am right.'

'Quite right,' agreed Sir Richard. 'Hideously right, Louisa!'

She got up. 'Well, I advise you to get married and settle down. Come, Mama! We have said all we meant to say, and you know we are to call in Brook Street on our way home. George, do you mean to come with us?'

'No,' said George. 'Not to call in Brook Street. I daresay I shall stroll up to White's presently.'

'Just as you please, my love,' said Louisa, drawing on her gloves again.

When the ladies had been escorted to the waiting barouche, George did not at once set out for his club, but accompanied his brother-in-law back into the house. He preserved a sympathetic silence until they were out of earshot of the servants, but caught Sir Richard's eye then, in a very pregnant look, and uttered the one word: 'Women!'

'Quite so,' said Sir Richard.

'Do you know what I'd do if I were you, my boy?'

'Yes,' said Sir Richard.

George was disconcerted. 'Damn it, you can't know!'

'You would do precisely what I shall do.'

'What's that?'

'Oh – offer for Melissa Brandon, of course,' said Sir Richard.

'Well, I wouldn't,' said George positively. 'I wouldn't marry Melissa Brandon for fifty sisters! I'd find a cosier armful, 'pon my soul I would!'

'The cosiest armful of my acquaintance was never so cosy as when she wanted to see my purse-strings untied,' said Sir Richard cynically.

George shook his head. 'Bad, very bad! I must say, it's enough to sour any man. But Louisa's right, you know: you ought to get married. Won't do to let the name die out.' An idea occurred to him. 'You wouldn't care to put it about that you'd lost all your money, I suppose?'

‘No,’ said Sir Richard, ‘I wouldn’t.’

‘I read somewhere of a fellow who went off to some place where he wasn’t known. Devil of a fellow he was: some kind of a foreign Count, I think. I don’t remember precisely, but there was a girl in it, who fell in love with him for his own sake.’

‘There would be,’ said Sir Richard.

‘You don’t like it?’ George rubbed his nose, a little crestfallen. ‘Well, damme if I know what to suggest!’

He was still pondering the matter when the butler announced Mr Wyndham, and a large, portly, and convivial-looking gentleman rolled into the room, ejaculating cheerfully: ‘Hallo, George! You here? Ricky, my boy, your mother’s been at me again, confound her! Made me promise I’d come round to see you, though what the devil she thinks I can do is beyond me!’

‘Spare me!’ said Sir Richard wearily. ‘I have already sustained a visit from my mother, not to mention Louisa.’

‘Well, I’m sorry for you, my boy, and if you take my advice you’ll marry that Brandon wench, and be done with it. What’s that you have there? Madeira? I’ll take a glass.’

Sir Richard gave him one. He lowered his bulk into a large armchair, stretched his legs out before him, and raised the glass. ‘Here’s a health to the bridegroom!’ he said, with a chuckle. ‘Don’t look so glum, nevvv! Think of the joy you’ll be bringing into Saar’s life!’

‘Damn you,’ said Sir Richard. ‘If you had ever had a shred of proper feeling, Lucius, you would have got married fifty years ago, and reared a pack of brats in your image. A horrible thought, I admit, but at least I should not now be cast for the role of Family Sacrifice.’

‘Fifty years ago,’ retorted his uncle, quite unmoved by these insults, ‘I was only just breeched. This is a very tolerable wine, Ricky. By the way, they tell me young Beverley Brandon’s badly dipped. You’ll be a damned public benefactor if you marry that girl. Better let your lawyer attend to the settlements, though. I’d be willing to lay you a monkey Saar tries to bleed you white. What’s the matter with you, George? Got the toothache?’

‘I don’t like it,’ said George. ‘I told Louisa so at the outset, but you know what women are! Myself, I wouldn’t have Melissa Brandon if she were the last woman left single.’

‘What, she ain’t the spotty one, surely?’ demanded Lucius, concerned.

‘No, that’s Sophia.’

‘Oh, well, nothing to worry about then! You marry the girl, Ricky: you’ll never have any peace if you don’t. Fill up your glass, George, and we’ll have another toast!’

‘What is it this time?’ enquired Sir Richard, replenishing the glasses. ‘Don’t spare me!’

‘To a pack of brats in your image, nevy: here’s to ’em!’ grinned his uncle.

TWO

Lord Saar lived in Brook Street with his wife, and his family of two sons and four daughters. Sir Richard Wyndham, driving to his prospective father-in-law's house twenty-four hours after his interview with his own parent, was fortunate enough to find Saar away from home, and Lady Saar, the butler informed him, on her way to Bath with the Honourable Sophia. He fell instead into the arms of the Honourable Cedric Brandon, a rakish young gentleman of lamentable habits, and a disastrous charm of manner.

'Ricky, my only friend!' cried the Honourable Cedric, dragging Sir Richard into a small saloon at the back of the house. 'Don't tell me you've come to offer for Melissa! They say good news don't kill a man, but *I* never listen to gossip! M'father says ruin stares us in the face. Lend me the money, dear boy, and I'll buy myself a pair of colours, and be off to the Peninsula, damme if I won't! But listen to me, Ricky! *Are* you listening?' He looked anxiously at Sir Richard, appeared satisfied, and said, wagging a solemn finger: 'Don't do it! There isn't a fortune big enough to settle *our* little affairs: take my word for it! Have nothing to do with Beverley! They say Fox gamed away a fortune before he was twenty-one. Give you my word, he was nothing to Bev, nothing at all. Between ourselves, Ricky, the old man has taken to brandy. H'sh! Not a word! Mustn't tell tales about m'father! But run, Ricky! That's my advice to you: *run!*'

'Would you buy yourself a pair of colours, if I gave you the money?' asked Sir Richard.

‘Sober, yes; drunk, no!’ replied Cedric, with his wholly disarming smile. ‘I’m very sober now, but I shan’t be so for long. Don’t give me a groat, dear old boy! Don’t give Bev a groat! He’s a bad man. Now, when I’m sober I’m a good man – but I ain’t sober above six hours out of the twenty-four, so you be warned! Now I’m off. I’ve done my best for you, for I like you, Ricky, but if you go to perdition in spite of me, I’ll wash my hands of you. No, damme, I’ll sponge on you for the rest of my days! Think, dear boy, think! Bev and your very obedient on your doorstep six days out of seven – duns – threats – wife’s brothers done-up – pockets to let – wife in tears – nothing to do but pay! Don’t do it! Fact is, we ain’t worth it!’

‘Wait!’ Sir Richard said, barring his passage. ‘If I settle your debts, will you go to the Peninsula?’

‘Ricky, it’s you who aren’t sober. Go home!’

‘Consider, Cedric, how well you would look in Hussar uniform!’

An impish smile danced in Cedric’s eyes. ‘Wouldn’t I just! But at this present I’d look better in Hyde Park. Out of the way, dear boy! I’ve a very important engagement. Backed a goose to win a hundred-yard race against a turkey-cock. Can’t lose! Greatest sporting event of the season!’

He was gone on the words, leaving Sir Richard, not, indeed, to run, as advised, but to await the pleasure of the Honourable Melissa Brandon.

She did not keep him waiting for long. A servant came to request him to step upstairs, and he followed the man up the wide staircase to the withdrawing-room on the first floor.

Melissa Brandon was a handsome, dark-haired young woman, a little more than twenty-five years old. Her profile was held to be faultless, but in full face her eyes were discovered to be rather too hard for beauty. She had not, in her first seasons, lacked suitors, but none of the gentlemen attracted by her undeniable good looks, had ever, in the cock-fighting phrase of her graceless elder brother, come up to scratch. As he bowed over her hand, Sir Richard remembered George’s

iceberg simile, and at once banished it from his obedient mind.

‘Well, Richard?’

Melissa’s voice was cool, rather matter-of-fact, just as her smile seemed more a mechanical civility than a spontaneous expression of pleasure.

‘I hope I see you well, Melissa?’ Sir Richard said formally.

‘Perfectly, I thank you. Pray sit down! I apprehend that you have come to discuss the question of our marriage.’

He regarded her from under slightly raised brows. ‘Dear me!’ he said mildly. ‘Someone would appear to have been busy.’

She was engaged upon some stitchery, and went on plying her needle with unruffled composure. ‘Do not let us beat about the bush!’ she said. ‘I am certainly past the age of being missish, and you, I believe, may rank as a sensible man.’

‘Were you ever missish?’ enquired Sir Richard.

‘I trust not. I have no patience with such folly. Nor am I romantic. In that respect, we must be thought to be well-suited.’

‘Must we?’ said Sir Richard, gently swinging his gold-handled quizzing-glass to and fro.

She seemed amused. ‘Certainly! I trust you have not, at this late date, grown sentimental! It would be quite absurd!’

‘Senility,’ pensively observed Sir Richard, ‘often brings sentiment in its train. Or so I have been informed.’

‘We need not concern ourselves with that. I like you very well, Richard, but there is just a little nonsense in your disposition which makes you turn everything to jest. I myself am of a more serious nature.’

‘Then in *that* respect, we cannot be thought to be well-suited,’ suggested Sir Richard.

‘I do not consider the objection insuperable. The life you have chosen to lead up till now has not been such as to encourage serious reflection, after all. I dare say you may grow more dependable, for you do not want for sense. *That*, however, must be left to the future. At all events, I am not so unreasonable as to feel the difference in our natures to be an impassable barrier to marriage.’