



# One

Sylvester stood in the window of his breakfast-parlour, leaning his hands on the ledge, and gazing out upon a fair prospect. No view of the ornamental water could be obtained from this, the east front of Chance, but the undulations of a lawn shaved all summer by scythemen were broken by a cedar, and beyond the lawn the stems of beech-trees, outliers of the Home Wood, shimmered in wintry sunlight. They still held their lure for Sylvester, though they beckoned him now to his coverts rather than to a land where every thicket concealed a dragon, and false knights came pricking down the rides. He and Harry, his twin, had slain the dragons, and ridden great wallops at the knights. There were none left now, and Harry had been dead for almost four years; but there were pheasants to tempt Sylvester forth, and they did tempt him, for a succession of black frosts had made the ground iron-hard, robbing him of two hunting days; and a blustering north wind would not have invited the most ardent of sportsmen to take a gun out. It was still very cold, but the wind had dropped, and the sun shone, and what a bore it was that he should have decided that this day, out of all the inclement ones that had preceded it, should be devoted to business. He could change his mind, of course, telling his butler to inform the various persons now awaiting his pleasure that he would see them on the following day. His agent-in-chief and his man of business had come all the way from London to attend upon him, but it did not occur to Sylvester that they could find any cause for complaint in

being kept kicking their heels. They were in his employ, and had no other concern than to serve his interests; they would accept his change of mind as the caprice to be expected from a noble and wealthy master.

But Sylvester was not capricious, and he had no intention of succumbing to temptation. Caprice bred bad servants, and where the management of vast estates was concerned good service was essential. Sylvester had only just entered his twenty-eighth year, but he had succeeded to his huge inheritance when he was nineteen, and whatever follies and extravagances he had committed they had never led him to treat that inheritance as his plaything, or to evade the least one of its responsibilities. He had been born to a great position, reared to fill it in a manner worthy of a long line of distinguished forebears, and as little as he questioned his right to command the obedience of all the persons whose names were inscribed on his staggering payroll did he question the inescapability of the duties which had been laid on his shoulders. Had he been asked if he enjoyed his consequence he would have replied truthfully that he never thought of it; but he would certainly have disliked very much to have had it suddenly removed.

No one was in the least likely to ask him such a question, of course. He was generally considered to be a singularly fortunate young man, endowed with rank, wealth, and elegance. No bad fairy had attended his christening to leaven his luck with the gift of a hunchback or a harelip; though not above medium height he was well proportioned, with good shoulders, a pair of shapely legs, and a countenance sufficiently pleasing to make the epithet *handsome*, frequently bestowed on it, not altogether ridiculous. In a lesser man the oddity of eyes set with the suspicion of a slant under flying black brows might have been accounted a blemish; in the Duke of Salford they were naturally held to lend distinction; and those who had admired his mother in her heyday remembered that she too had that thin, soaring line of eyebrow. It was just as though the brows had been added with a paintbrush, drawn in a sleek line upwards towards the temples.

In the Duchess this peculiarity was charming; in Sylvester it was less attractive. It gave him, when he was vexed, and the upward trend was exaggerated by a frown, a slight look of a satyr.

He was about to turn away from the window when his attention was caught by a small, scampering figure. Emerging from the shelter of a yew hedge, a little boy with a cluster of golden curls set off across the lawn in the direction of the Home Wood, his nankeen-covered legs twinkling over the grass, and the freshly laundered frill of his shirt rucked up under one ear by a duffle coat, dragged over his little blue jacket by hurried and inexpert hands.

Sylvester laughed, throwing up the window. His impulse was to wish Edmund success in his adventure, but even as he leaned out he checked it. Though Edmund would not stop for his nurse or his tutor he would do so if his uncle called to him, and since he seemed to have made good his escape from these persons it would be unsportsmanlike to check him when his goal was within sight. To keep him dallying under the window would put him in grave danger of being captured, and that, reflected Sylvester, would lead to one of those scenes which bored him to death. Edmund would beg his leave to go off to the woods, and whether he gave it or withheld it he would be obliged to endure the reproaches of his widowed sister-in-law. He would be accused of treating poor little Edmund either with brutal severity, or with a heartless unconcern for his welfare; for Lady Henry Rayne could never bring herself to forgive him for having persuaded his brother (as she obstinately affirmed) to leave Edmund to his sole guardianship. It was of no use for anyone to tell Lady Henry that Harry's will had been drawn up on the occasion of his marriage, merely to ensure, in the event of accident, which no one had thought more unlikely than Harry himself, that any offspring of the match would be safe under the protection of the head of his house. However stupid Sylvester might think her she hoped she was not so green as to imagine that his attorney would have dared to insert so infamous a clause except at his express command. Sylvester, with the wound of

Harry's death still raw, had allowed himself to be goaded into bitter retort: 'If you imagine that I wished to have the brat thrust on to me you are even greener than I had supposed!'

He was to regret those hasty words, for although he had immediately retracted them he had never been allowed to forget them; and they formed today, when the custody of Edmund had become a matter of acute importance, the foundation-stone of Lady Henry's arguments. 'You never wanted him,' she reminded him. 'You said so yourself!'

It had been partly true, of course: except as Harry's son he had had very little interest in a two-year-old infant, and had paid no more heed to him than might have been expected of a young man. When Edmund began to grow out of babyhood, however, he saw rather more of him, for Edmund's first object, whenever his magnificent uncle was at Chance, was to attach himself as firmly as possible to him. He had qualities wholly lacking in Button, Edmund's nurse (and his father's and uncle's before him), or in Mama. He showed no disposition to fondle his nephew; he was indifferent to torn clothes; such conversation as he addressed to Edmund was brief and to the point; and while he might, in an unpropitious mood, send him somewhat peremptorily about his business, it was always possible that he would hoist him up on to his saddle before him, and canter off with him through the park. These attributes were accompanied by a less agreeable but equally godlike idiosyncrasy: he exacted instant obedience to his commands, and he had a short way of dealing with recalcitrants.

Sylvester thought that Ianthe and Button were doing their best to spoil Edmund, but while he did not hesitate to make plain to that astute young gentleman the unwisdom of employing with him the tactics that succeeded so well in the nursery it was rarely that he interfered with his upbringing. He saw no faults in Edmund that could not speedily be cured when he was rather older; and by the time he was six had grown to like him as much for his own sake as for his father's.

Edmund had disappeared from view. Sylvester pulled the

window down again, thinking that he really ought to provide the brat with a livelier tutor than the Reverend Loftus Leyburn, the elderly and rather infirm cleric who was his – or, more accurately, his mother’s – chaplain. He had thought it a poor arrangement when Ianthe had begged Mr Loftus to teach Edmund his first lessons, but not a matter of sufficient moment to make it necessary for him to provoke her by refusing to agree to the scheme. Now she was complaining that Edmund haunted the stables, and learned the most vulgar language there. What the devil did she expect? wondered Sylvester.

He turned from the window as the door opened, and his butler came in, followed by a young footman, who began to clear away the remains of a substantial breakfast.

‘I’ll see Mr Ossett and Pewsey at noon, Reeth,’ Sylvester said. ‘Chale and Brough may bring their books in to me at the same time. I am going up to sit with her grace now. You might send down a message to Trent, warning him that I may want –’ He paused, glancing towards the window. ‘No, never mind that! The light will be gone by four o’clock.’

‘It seems a pity your grace should be cooped up in the office on such a fine day,’ said Reeth suggestively.

‘A great pity, but it can’t be helped.’ He found that he had dropped his handkerchief, and that the footman had hurried to pick it up for him. He said, ‘Thank you’, as he took it, and accompanied the words with a slight smile. He had a singularly charming smile, and it ensured for him, no matter how exacting might be his demands, the uncomplaining exertions of his servants. He was perfectly well aware of that, just as he was aware of the value of the word of praise dropped at exactly the right moment; and he would have thought himself extremely stupid to withhold what cost him so little and was productive of such desirable results.

Leaving the breakfast-parlour, he made his way to the main hall, and (it might have been thought) to another century, since this central portion of a pile that sprawled over several acres was all that remained of the original structure. Rugged beams,

plastered walls, and a floor of uneven flagstones lingered on here in odd but not infelicitous contrast to the suave elegance of the more modern parts of the great house. The winged staircase of Tudor origin that led up from the hall to a surrounding gallery was guarded by two figures in full armour; the walls were embellished with clusters of antique weapons; the windows were of armorial glass; and under an enormous hood a pile of hot ashes supported several blazing logs. Before this fire a liver-and-white spaniel lay in an attitude of watchful expectancy. She raised her head when she heard Sylvester's step, and began to wag her tail; but when he came into the hall her tail sank, and although she bundled across the floor to meet him, and looked adoringly up at him when he stooped to pat her, she neither frisked about him nor uttered barks of joyful anticipation. His valet was hardly more familiar with his wardrobe than she, and she knew well that pantaloons and Hessian boots meant that the most she could hope for was to be permitted to lie at his feet in the library.

The Duchess's apartments comprised, besides her bed-chamber, and the dressing-room occupied by her maid, an ante-chamber which led into a large, sunny apartment, known to the household as the Duchess's Drawing-room. She rarely went beyond it, for she had been for many years the victim of an arthritic complaint which none of the eminent physicians who had attended her, or any of the cures she had undergone, had been able to arrest. She could still manage, supported by her attendants, to drag herself from her bedchamber to her drawing-room, but once lowered into her chair she could not rise from it without assistance. What degree of pain she suffered no one knew, for she never complained, or asked for sympathy. 'Very well' was her invariable reply to solicitous enquiries; and if anyone deplored the monotony of her existence she laughed, and said that pity was wasted on her, and would be better bestowed on those who danced attendance on her. As for herself, with her son to bring her all the London on-dits, her grandson to amuse her with his pranks, her daughter-in-law to discuss the

latest fashions with her, her patient cousin to bear with her crotchets, her devoted maid to cosset her, and her old friend, Mr Leyburn, to browse with her amongst her books she thought she was rather to be envied than pitied. Except to her intimates she did not mention her poems, but the fact was that the Duchess was an author. Mr Blackwell had published two volumes of her verses, and these had enjoyed quite a vogue amongst members of the ton; for although they were, of course, published anonymously the secret of their authorship soon leaked out, and was thought to lend considerable interest to them.

She was engaged in writing when Sylvester entered the room, on the table so cleverly made by the estate carpenter to fit across the arms of her wing-chair; but as soon as she saw who had come in she laid down her pen, and welcomed Sylvester with a smile more charming than his own because so much warmer, and exclaimed: 'Ah, how delightful! But so vexatious for you, love, to be obliged to stay at home on the first good shooting-day we have had in a se'enight!'

'A dead bore, isn't it?' he responded, bending over her to kiss her cheek. She put up her hand to lay it on his shoulder, and he stayed for a moment, scanning her face. Apparently he was satisfied with what he saw there, for he let his eyes travel to the delicate lace confection set on her silvered black hair, and said: 'A new touch, Mama? That's a very fetching cap!'

The ready laughter sprang to her eyes. 'Confess that Anna warned you to take notice of my finery!'

'Certainly not! Do you think I must be told by your maid when you are looking in great beauty?'

'Sylvester, you make love so charmingly that I fear you must be the most outrageous flirt!'

'Oh, not *outrageous*, Mama! Are you busy with a new poem?'

'Merely a letter. Dearest, if you will push the table away, you may draw up that chair a little, and we can enjoy a comfortable prose.'

This he was prevented from doing by the hurried entrance from the adjoining bedchamber of Miss Augusta Penistone,



who begged him, somewhat incoherently, not to trouble himself, since she considered the task peculiarly her own. She then pushed the table to the side of the room, and instead of effacing herself, as he always wished she would, lingered, amiably smiling at him. She was an angular, rather awkward lady, as kind as she was plain, and she served the Duchess, whose kinswoman she was, in the capacity of a companion. Her good-nature was inexhaustible, but she was unfortunately quite unintelligent, and rarely failed to irritate Sylvester by asking questions to which the answers were patent, or commenting upon the obvious. He bore it very well, for his manners were extremely good, but when, after stating that she saw he had not gone out hunting, she recollected that one didn't hunt after severe frost and said, with a merry laugh at her mistake: 'Well, that *was* a stupid thing for me to have said, wasn't it?' he was provoked into replying, though with perfect suavity: 'It was, wasn't it?'

The Duchess intervened at this stage of the dialogue, urging her cousin to go out into the sunshine while it lasted; and after saying that, to be sure, she might venture to do so if dear Sylvester meant to sit with his mama, which she had no doubt of, and pointing out that Anna would come if the Duchess rang the bell, she got herself to the door, which Sylvester was holding open. She was obliged to pause there to tell him that she was now going to leave him to chat with his mama, adding: 'For I am sure you wish to be private with her, don't you?'

'I do, but how you guessed it, cousin, I can't imagine!' he replied.

'Oh!' declared Miss Penistone gaily, 'a pretty thing it would be if I didn't know, after all these years, just what you like! Well, I will run away, then – but you should not trouble to open the door for me! That is to treat me like a stranger! I am for ever telling you so, am I not? But you are always so obliging!'

He bowed, and shut the door behind her. The Duchess said: 'An undeserved compliment, Sylvester. My dear, how came you to speak as you did? It was not kind.'

‘Her folly is intolerable!’ he said impatiently. ‘Why do you keep such a hubble-bubble woman about you? She must vex you past bearing!’

‘She is not very wise, certainly,’ admitted the Duchess. ‘But I couldn’t send her away, you know!’

‘Shall I do so for you?’

She was startled, but, supposing that he was speaking out of an unthinking exasperation, only said: ‘Nonsensical boy! You know you could no more do so than I could!’

He raised his brows. ‘Of course I could do it, Mama! What should stop me?’

‘You cannot be serious!’ she exclaimed, half inclined still to laugh at him.

‘But I’m perfectly serious, my dear! Be frank with me! Don’t you wish her at Jericho?’

She said, with a rueful twinkle: ‘Well, yes – sometimes I do! Don’t repeat that, will you? I have at least the grace to be ashamed of myself!’ She perceived that his expression was one of surprise, and said in a serious tone: ‘Of course it vexes you, and me too, when she says silly things, and hasn’t the tact to go away when you come to visit me, but I promise you I think myself fortunate to have her. It can’t be very amusing to be tied to an invalid, you know, but she is never hipped or out of temper, and whatever I ask her to do for me she does willingly, and so cheerfully that she puts me in danger of believing that she enjoys being at my beck and call.’

‘So I should hope!’

‘Now, Sylvester –’

‘My dear Mama, she has hung on your sleeve ever since I can remember, and a pretty generous sleeve it has been! You have always made her an allowance far beyond what you would have paid a stranger hired to bear you company, haven’t you?’

‘You speak as though you grudged it!’

‘No more than I grudge the wages of my valet, if you think her worth it. I pay large wages to my servants, but I keep none in my employment who doesn’t earn his wage.’

There was a troubled look in the eyes that searched his face, but the Duchess only said: 'The cases are not the same, but don't let us brangle about it! You may believe that it would make me very unhappy to lose Augusta. Indeed, I don't know how I should go on.'

'If that's the truth, Mama, you need say no more. Do you suppose I wouldn't pay anyone who wished to keep about you double – treble – what you pay Augusta?' He saw her stretch out her hand to him, and went to her immediately. 'You know I wouldn't do anything you don't like! Don't look so distressed, dearest!'

She pressed his hand. 'I know you wouldn't. Don't heed me! It is only that it shocked me a little to hear you speak so hardly. But no one has less cause to complain of hardness in you than I, my darling.'

'Nonsense!' he said, smiling down at her. 'Keep your tedious cousin, love – but allow me to wish that you had with you someone who could entertain you better – enter into what interests you!'

'Well, I have Ianthe,' she reminded him. 'She doesn't precisely enter into my interests, but we go on very comfortably together.'

'I am happy to hear it. But it begins to seem as if you won't have the doubtful comfort of her society for much longer.'

'My dear, if you are going to suggest that I should employ a second lady to keep me company, I do beg of you to spare your breath!'

'No, that wouldn't answer.' He paused, and then said quite coolly: 'I am thinking of getting married, Mama.'

She was taken so much by surprise that she could only stare at him. He had the reputation of being a dangerous flirt, but she had almost given up hope of his coming to the point of offering for any lady's hand in matrimony. She had reason to think that he had had more than one mistress in keeping – very expensive Cythereans some of them had been if her sister were to be believed! – and it had begun to seem as if he preferred that way

of life to a more ordered existence. Recovering from her stupefaction, she said: 'My dear, this is very sudden!'

'Not so sudden as you think, Mama. I have been meaning for some time to speak to you about it.'

'Good gracious! And I never suspected it! Do, pray, sit down and tell me all about it!'

He looked at her keenly. 'Would you be glad, Mama?'

'Of course I should!'

'Then I think that settles it.'

That made her laugh. 'Of all the absurd things to say! Very well! having won my approval, tell me everything!'

He said, gazing frowningly into the fire: 'I don't know that there's so much to tell you. I fancy you guessed I haven't much cared for the notion of becoming riveted. I never met the female to whom I wished to be leg-shackled. Harry did, and if anything had been needed to confirm me in —'

'My dear, leave that!' she interposed. 'Harry was happy in his marriage, remember! I believe, too, that although Ianthe's feelings are not profound she was most sincerely attached to him.'

'So much attached to him that within a year of his death she was pining for the sight of a ballroom, and within four is planning to marry a worthless fribble! It will not do, Mama!'

'Very well, my dear, but we are talking of your marriage, not Harry's, are we not?'

'True! Well, I realised — oh, above a year ago! — that it was my duty to marry. Not so much for the sake of an heir, because I have one already, but —'

'Sylvester, don't put that thought into Edmund's head!'

He laughed. 'Much he would care! His ambition is to become a mail-coachman — or it was until Keighley let him have the yard of tin for a plaything! Now he cannot decide whether to be a coachman or a guard. Pretty flat he would think it to be told that he would be obliged instead to step into my shoes!'

She smiled. 'Yes, *now* he would, but later —'

'Well, that's one of my reasons, Mama. If I mean to marry I

ought, I think, to do so before Edmund is old enough to think his nose has been put out of joint. So I began some months ago to look about me.'

'You are the oddest creature! Next you will tell me you made out a list of the qualities your wife must possess!'

'More or less,' he admitted. 'You may laugh, Mama, but you'll agree that certain qualities are indispensable! She must be well born, for instance. I don't mean necessarily a great match, but a girl of my own order.'

'Ah, yes, I agree with *that!* And next?'

'Well, a year ago I should have said she must be beautiful,' he replied meditatively. (She is not a beauty, thought the Duchess.) 'But I'm inclined to think now that it is more important that she should be intelligent. I don't think I could tolerate a hen-witted wife. Besides, I don't mean to foist another fool on to you.'

'I am very much obliged to you!' she said, a good deal entertained. 'Clever, but not beautiful: very well! continue!'

'No, some degree of beauty I do demand. She must have countenance, at least, and the sort of elegance which you have, Mama.'

'Don't try to turn my head, you flatterer! Have you discovered amongst the *débutantes* one who is endowed with all these qualities?'

'At first glance, I suppose a dozen, but in the end only five.'

'Five!'

'Well, only five with whom I could perhaps bear to spend a large part of my life. There is Lady Jane Saxby: she's pretty, and good-natured. Then there's Barningham's daughter: she has a great deal of vivacity. Miss Bellerby is a handsome girl, with a little reserve, which I don't dislike. Lady Mary Torrington – oh, a diamond of the first water! And lastly Miss Orton: not beautiful, but quite taking, and has agreeable manners.' He paused, his gaze still fixed on the smouldering logs. The Duchess waited expectantly. He looked up presently, and smiled at her. 'Well, Mama?' he said affably. 'Which of them shall it be?'

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After an astonished moment the Duchess said: 'Dearest, are you roasting me? You can't in all seriousness be asking me to choose for you!'

'No, not choose precisely. I wish you will advise me, though. You're not acquainted with any of them, but you know their families, and if you should have a decided preference –'

'But, Sylvester, have *you* no preference?'

'No, that's the devil of it: I haven't. Whenever I think one more eligible than any of the others as sure as check I find she has some fault or trick which I don't like. Lady Jane's laugh, for instance; or Miss Orton's infernal harp! I've no turn for music, and to be obliged to endure a harp's being eternally twanged in my own house – no, I think that's coming it a trifle too strong, don't you, Mama? Then Lady Mary –'

'Thank you, I have heard enough to be able to give you my advice!' interrupted his mother. 'Don't make an offer for any one of them! You are not in love!'

'In love! No, of course I am not. Is that so necessary?'

'Most necessary, my dear! Don't, I beg you, offer marriage where you can't offer love as well!'

He smiled at her. 'You are too romantic, Mama.'

'Am I? But you seem to have no romance in you at all!'

'Well, I don't look for it in marriage, at any rate.'

'Only in the muslin company?'

He laughed. 'You shock me, Mama! That's a different matter. I shouldn't call it romance either – or only one's first adventure,

perhaps. And even when I was a greenhead, and fell in love with the most dazzling little bird of Paradise you ever saw, I don't think I really fancied myself to have formed a lasting passion! I daresay I'm too volatile, in which case –'

'No such thing! You have not yet been fortunate enough to meet the girl for whom you *will* form a lasting passion.'

'Very true: I haven't! And since I've been on the town for nearly ten years, and may be said to have had my pick of all the eligible débutantes that appear yearly on the Marriage Mart, we must conclude that if I'm not too volatile I must be too nice in my requirements. To be frank with you, Mama, you are the only lady of my acquaintance with whom I don't soon become heartily bored!'

A tiny frown appeared between her winged brows as she listened to this speech. It was spoken in a bantering tone, but she found it disturbing. 'Your *pick* of them, Sylvester?'

'Yes, I think so. I must have seen all the eligibles, I fancy.'

'And have made quite a number of them the objects of your gallantry – if the things I hear are to be believed!'

'My aunt Louisa,' said Sylvester unerringly. 'What an incorrigible gossip your sister is, my dear! Well, if I have now and then shown a preference at least she can't accuse me of having been so particular in my attentions as to have raised false hopes in any maiden's bosom!'

The hint of laughter had quite vanished from her eyes. The image she cherished of this beloved son was all at once blurred; and a feeling of disquiet made it difficult for her to know what she should say to him. As she hesitated, an interruption occurred. The door was opened; a pretty, plaintive voice said: 'May I come in, Mama-Duchess?' and there appeared on the threshold a vision of beauty dressed in a blue velvet pelisse, and a hat with a high poke-front which made a frame for a ravishing countenance. Ringlets of bright gold fell beside damask cheeks; large blue eyes were set beneath delicately arched brows; the little nose was perfectly straight; and the red mouth deliciously curved.

‘Good-morning, my love. Of course you may come in!’ said the Duchess.

The vision had by this time perceived her brother-in-law, and although she did come in she said with a marked diminution of cordiality: ‘Oh! I didn’t know you had Sylvester with you, ma’am. I beg your pardon, but I only came to discover if Edmund was here.’

‘I haven’t seen him this morning,’ replied the Duchess. ‘Is he not with Mr Leyburn?’

‘No, and it is particularly vexatious because I wish to take him with me to visit the Arkholmes! You know I have been meaning for days to drive over to the Grange, ma’am, and now, on the first fine morning we have had for an age, no one can tell me where he is!’

‘Perhaps he has slipped off to the stables, little rogue!’

‘No, though, to be sure, that was what I expected too, for ever since Sylvester took to *encouraging* him to haunt the stables –’

‘My dear, they all do so, and without the least encouragement!’ interposed the Duchess. ‘Mine certainly did – they were the most deplorable urchins! Tell me, did you have that charming pelisse made from the velvets we chose from the patterns sent down last month? How well it has made-up!’

The effect of this attempt to divert the beauty’s thoughts was unfortunate. ‘Yes, but only think, ma’am!’ exclaimed Ianthe. ‘I had a suit made from it for Edmund to wear when he goes out with me – quite simple, but after the style of that red dress the boy has on in the picture by Reynolds. I forget where I saw it, but I thought at once how well Edmund would look in it if only it were not red but blue!’

‘Wouldn’t he just!’ muttered Sylvester.

‘What did you say?’ demanded Ianthe suspiciously.

‘Nothing.’

‘I suppose it was something ill-natured. To be sure, I never hoped that *you* would think it pretty!’

‘You are mistaken. The picture you would both present would be pretty enough to take one’s breath away. Assuming, of course,



that Edmund could be persuaded to behave conformably. Standing within your arm, with that soulful look on his face – no, that won't do! He only wears that when he's plotting mischief. Well –'

'Sylvester, *will* you be silent?' begged the Duchess, trying not to laugh. 'Don't heed him, my dear child! He's only quizzing you!'

'Oh, I know that, ma'am!' said Ianthe, her colour considerably heightened. 'I know, too, who it is who teaches poor little Edmund not to mind me!'

'Oh, good God, what next?' Sylvester exclaimed.

'You do!' she insisted. 'And it shows how little affection you have for him! If you cared a rap for him you wouldn't encourage him to run into heaven knows what danger!'

'*What* danger?'

'Anything might happen to him!' she declared. 'At this very moment he may be at the bottom of the lake!'

'He is nowhere near the lake. If you must have it, I saw him making off to the Home Wood!'

'And you made not the smallest effort to call him back, I collect!'

'No. The last time I interfered in Edmund's illicit amusements I figured in your conversation as a monster of inhumanity for three days.'

'I never said any such thing, but only that – besides, he may change his mind, and go to the lake after all!'

'Make yourself easy: he won't! Not while he knows I'm at home, at all events.'

She said fretfully: 'I might have known how it would be! I would as lief not to go to the Grange at all now, and I wouldn't, only that I have had the horses put to. But I shan't know a moment's peace of mind for wondering if my poor, orphaned child is safe, or at the bottom of the lake!'

'If he should fail to appear in time for his dinner, I will have the lake dragged,' promised Sylvester, walking to the door, and opening it. 'Meanwhile, however careless I may be of my

nephew I am not careless of my horses, and I do beg of you, if you have had a pair put to, not to keep them standing in this weather!’

This request incensed Ianthe so much that she flounced out of the room in high dudgeon.

‘Edifying!’ remarked Sylvester. ‘Believing her orphaned son to be at the bottom of the lake this devoted parent departs on an expedition of pleasure!’

‘My dear, she knows very well he isn’t at the bottom of the lake! Can you *never* meet without rubbing against one another? You are quite as unjust to her as she is to you, I must tell you!’

He shrugged. ‘I daresay. If I had ever seen a trace of her vaunted devotion to Edmund I could bear with her patiently, but I never have! If he will be so obliging as to submit to her caresses she is pleased to think she dotes on him, but when he becomes noisy it is quite a comedy to see how quickly she can develop the headache, so that Button must be sent for to remove her darling! She never went near him when he had the measles, and when she made his toothache an excuse to carry him off to London, and then was ready to let the brat’s tooth rot in his head rather than put herself to the trouble of compelling him to submit to its extraction –’

‘I knew we should come to it!’ interrupted the Duchess, throwing up her hands. ‘Let me tell you, my son, that it takes a great deal of resolution to drag a reluctant child to the dentist! I never had enough! It fell to Button to perform the dreadful duty – and so it would have done in Edmund’s case, only that she was ill at the time!’

‘I shan’t let you tell me, Mama,’ he said, laughing. ‘For I *have* performed the dreadful duty, remember!’

‘So you have! Poor Edmund! Swooped upon in the Park, snatched up into your curricule, and whisked off to the torture-chamber in such a ruthless style! I promise you my heart bled for him!’

‘It might well have done so had you seen his face as *I* saw it! I suppose the witless abigail who had him in charge told you

I swooped upon him? All I did was to drive him to Tilton's immediately, and what was needed was not resolution but firmness! No, Mama: don't ask me to credit Ianthe with devotion to her brat, for it sickens me! I only wish I knew who was the sapskull who told her how lovely she appeared with her child in her arms. Also that I hadn't been fool enough to allow myself to be persuaded to commission Lawrence to paint her in that affecting pose!

'You did so to give Harry pleasure,' said the Duchess gently. 'I have always been glad to think it was finished in time for him to see it.'

Sylvester strode over the window, and stood looking out. After a few minutes he said: 'I'm sorry, Mama. I should not have said that.'

'No, of course you should not, dearest. I wish you will try not to be so hard on Ianthe, for she is very much to be pitied, you know. You didn't like it when she began to go into society again with her mama, at the end of that first year of mourning. Well, I didn't like it either, but how could one expect such a pleasure-loving little creature to stay moping here, after all? It was not improper for her to put off her blacks.' She hesitated, and then added: 'It is not improper for her to be wishing to marry again now, Sylvester.'

'I haven't accused her of impropriety.'

'No, but you are making it dreadfully hard for her, my love! She may not be devoted to Edmund, but to take him from her entirely—'

'If that should happen, it will be her doing, not mine! She may make her home here for as long as she chooses, or she may take Edmund to live with her at the Dower House. All I have ever said is that Harry's son will be reared at Chance, and under my eye! If Ianthe marries again she is welcome to visit Edmund whenever she pleases. I have even told her she may have him to stay with her at reasonable intervals. But one thing I will never do, and that is to permit him to grow up under Nugent Fotherby's aegis! Good God, Mama, how

can you think it possible I would so abuse my twin's trust?"

'Ah, no, no! But is Sir Nugent so very bad? I was a little acquainted with his father – he was so amiable that he said yes and amen to everything! – but I think I never met the son.'

'You needn't repine! A wealthy fribble, three parts idiot, and the fourth – never mind! A pretty guardian I should be to abandon Edmund to his and Ianthe's upbringing! Do you know what Harry said to me, Mama? They were almost the last words he spoke to me. He said: "You'll look after the boy, Dook." He stopped, his voice cracking on that last word. After a moment he said, not very easily: 'You know how he used to call me that – with that twinkle in his eye. It wasn't a question, or a request. He *knew* I should, and he said it, not to remind me, but because it was a comfortable thought that came into his head, and he always told me what he was thinking.' He saw that his mother had shaded her eyes with one hand, and crossed the room to her side, taking her other hand, and holding it closely. 'Forgive me! I must make you understand, Mama!'

'I do understand, Sylvester, but how can I think it right to keep the child here with no one but old Button to look after him, or some tutor for whom he's far too young? If I were not useless –' She clipped the words off short.

Knowing her as he did, he made no attempt to answer what had been left unspoken, but said calmly: 'Yes, I too have considered that, and it forms a strong reason for my marriage. I fancy Ianthe would soon grow reconciled to the thought of parting with Edmund, could she but leave him in his *aunt's* charge. She wouldn't then incur the stigma of heartlessness, would she? She cares a great deal for what people may say of her – and I must own that after presenting a portrait of herself to the world in the rôle of devoted parent, I don't perceive how she *can* abandon Edmund to the mercy of his wicked uncle. My wife, you know, could very well be held to have softened my disposition!'

'Now, Sylvester – ! She can never have said you were wicked!'

He smiled. 'She may not have used that precise term, but she has regaled everyone with the tale of my disregard for Edmund's

welfare, and frequent brutality to him. They may not believe the whole, but I've reason to suppose that even a man of such good sense as Elvaston thinks I treat the boy with unmerited severity.'

'Well, if Lord Elvaston doesn't know his daughter better than to believe the farradiddles she utters I have a poor opinion of his sense!' said the Duchess, quite tartly. 'Do let us stop talking about Ianthe, my love!'

'Willingly! I had rather talk of my own affairs. Mama, what sort of female would you wish me to marry?'

'In your present state, I don't wish you to marry *any* sort of a female. When you come out of it, the sort *you* wish to marry, of course!'

'You are not being in the least helpful!' he complained. 'I thought mothers always made marriage plans for their sons!'

'And consequently suffered some severe disappointments! I am afraid the only marriage I ever planned for you was with a three-day infant, when you were eight years old!'

'Come! this is better!' he said encouragingly. 'Who was she? Do I know her?'

'You haven't mentioned her, but I should think you must at least have seen her, for she was presented this year, and had her first season. Her grandmother wrote to tell me of it, and I almost asked you –' She broke off, vexed with herself, and altered the sentence she had been about to utter. '– to give her a kind message from me, only did not, for she could hardly be expected to remember me. She's Lady Ingham's granddaughter.'

'What, my respected godmama? One of the Ingham girls? Oh, no, my dear! I regret infinitely, but – *no!*'

'No, no, Lord Marlow's daughter!' she replied, laughing. 'He married Verena Ingham, who was my dearest friend, and the most captivating creature!'

'Better and better!' he approved. 'Why have I never encountered the captivating Lady Marlow?' He stopped, frowning. 'But I have! I'm not acquainted with her – in fact, I don't remember that I've ever so much as spoken to her, but I must tell you, Mama, that whatever she may have been in her youth –'

‘Good heavens, *that* odious woman is Marlow’s second! Verena died when her baby was not a fortnight old.’

‘Very sad. Tell me about her!’

‘I don’t think you would be much the wiser if I did,’ she answered, wondering if he was trying to divert her mind from the memories he had himself evoked. ‘She wasn’t beautiful, or accomplished, or even modish, I fear! She defeated every effort to turn her into a fashionable young lady, and never appeared elegant except in her riding-dress. She did the most outrageous things, and nobody cared a bit – not even Lady Cork! We came out in the same season, and were the greatest of friends; but while I was so fortunate as to meet Papa – and to fall in love with him at sight, let me tell you! – she refused every offer that was made her – scores of them, for she never lacked for suitors! – and declared she preferred her horses to any man she had met. Poor Lady Ingham was in despair! And in the end she married Marlow, of all people! I believe she must have liked him for his horsemanship, for I am sure there was nothing else to like in him. Not a very exciting story, I’m afraid! Why did you wish to hear it?’

‘Oh, I wished to know what sort of a woman she was! Marlow I do know, and I should suppose that any daughter of his must be an intolerable bore. But your Verena’s child might be the very wife for me, don’t you think? You would be disposed to like her, which must be an object with me; and although I don’t mean to burden myself with a wife who wants conduct, I should imagine that there must be enough of Marlow’s blood in this girl to leaven whatever wildness she may have inherited from her mother. Eccentricity may be diverting, Mama, but it is out of place in a wife: certainly in my wife!’

‘My dear, what nonsense you are talking! If I believed you meant it I should be most seriously disturbed!’

‘But I do mean it! I thought you would have been pleased, too! What could be more romantic than to marry the girl who was betrothed to me in her cradle?’

She smiled, but she did not look to be much amused. His eyes

searched her face; he said in the caressing tone he used only to her: 'What is it, my dear? Tell me!'

She said: 'Sylvester, you have talked of five girls who might perhaps *suit* you; and now you are talking of a girl of whose existence you were unaware not ten minutes ago – and as though you had only to decide between them! My dear, has it not occurred to you that you might find yourself rebuffed?'

His brow cleared. 'Is *that* all? No, no, Mama, I shan't be rebuffed!'

'So sure, Sylvester?'

'Of course I'm sure, Mama! Oh, not of Miss Marlow! For anything I know, her affections may be engaged already.'

'Or she might take you in dislike,' suggested the Duchess.

'Take me in dislike? Why should she?' he asked, surprised.

'How can I tell? These things do happen, you know.'

'If you mean she might not *fall in love* with me, I daresay she might not, though I know of no reason, if she doesn't love another man, why she shouldn't come to do so – or, at any rate, to like me very tolerably! Do you suppose me to be so lacking in address that I can't make myself agreeable when I wish to? Fie on you, Mama!'

'No,' she said. 'But I didn't know you had so much address that you could beguile no fewer than five girls of rank and fashion to be ready to accept an offer from you.'

He could not resist. 'Well, Mama, you said yourself that I make love charmingly!' he murmured.

It drew a smile from her, because she could never withstand that gleaming look, but she shook her head as well, and said: 'For shame, Sylvester! Do you mean to sound like a coxcomb?'

He laughed. 'Of course I don't! To be frank with you, there are not five but a dozen young women of rank and fashion who are perfectly ready to receive an offer from me. I'm not hard to swallow, you know, though I don't doubt I have as many faults as a Mr Smith or a Mr Jones. Mine are more palatable, however: scarcely noticeable for the rich marchpane that covers them!'

'Do you wish for a wife who marries you for the sake of your

possessions?’ the Duchess asked, arching her brows.

‘I don’t think I mind very much, provided we were mutually agreeable. Such a wife would be unlikely to enact me any tragedies, and anything of that nature, Mama, would lead to our being regularly parted within a twelvemonth. I couldn’t endure it!’

‘The enacting of tragedies, my son, is not an invariable concomitant of love-matches,’ she said dryly.

‘Who should know that better than I?’ he retorted, his smile embracing her. ‘But where am I to look for your counterpart, my dear? Show her to me, and I will engage to fall desperately in love with her, and marry her, fearing no after-ills!’

‘Sylvester, you are too absurd!’

‘Not as absurd as you think! Seriously, Mama, although I have seen some love-matches that have prospered, I have seen a great many that most certainly have not! Oh! no doubt some husbands and wives of my acquaintance would stare to hear me say I thought them anything but happy! Perhaps they enjoy jealousies, tantrums, quarrels, and stupid misunderstandings: I should not! The well-bred woman who marries me because she has a fancy to be a duchess will suit me very well, and will probably fill her position admirably.’ His eyes quizzed her. ‘Or would you like me to turn my coat inside out, and sally forth in humble disguise, like the prince in a fairy-tale? I never thought much of that prince, you know! A chuckle-headed fellow, for how could he hope, masquerading as a mean person, to come near any but quite ineligible females whom it would have been impossible for him to marry?’

‘Very true!’ she replied.

He was always watchful where she was concerned. It struck him now that she was suddenly looking tired; and he said with quick compunction: ‘I’ve fagged you to death with my nonsense! Now, why did you let me talk you into a headache? Shall I send Anna to you?’

‘No, indeed! My head doesn’t ache, I promise you,’ she said, smiling tenderly up at him.



‘I wish I might believe you!’ he said, bending over her to kiss her cheek. ‘I’ll leave you to rest before you are assailed by Augusta again: don’t let her plague you!’

He went away, and she remained lost in her reflections until roused from them by her cousin’s return.

‘All alone, dear Elizabeth?’ Miss Penistone exclaimed. ‘Now, if I had but known – but in general I do believe Sylvester would stay with you for ever, if I were not obliged at last to come in! I am sure I have said a hundred times that I never knew such an attentive son. So considerate, too! There was never anything like it!’

‘Ah, yes!’ the Duchess said. ‘To me so considerate, so endlessly kind!’

She sounded a little mournful, which was unusual in her. Miss Penistone, speaking much in the heartening tone Button used to divert Edmund when he was cross, said: ‘He was looking particularly handsome today, wasn’t he? Such an excellent figure, and his air so distinguished! What heart-burnings there will be when at last he throws the handkerchief!’

She laughed amiably at this thought, but the Duchess did not seem to be amused. She said nothing, but Miss Penistone saw her hands clasp and unclasp on the arm of the chair, and at once realised that no doubt she must be afraid that so rich a prize as Sylvester might be caught by some wretchedly designing creature quite unworthy of his attention. ‘And *no* fear of his marrying to disoblige you, as the saying goes,’ said Miss Penistone brightly, but with an anxious eye on the Duchess. ‘With so many girls on the catch for him I daresay you would be quite in a worry if he were not so sensible. That thought came into *my* head once – so absurd! – and I mentioned it to Louisa, when she was staying here in the summer. “Not he!” she said – you know her abrupt way! “He knows his worth too well!” Which set my mind quite at rest, as you may suppose.’

It did not seem to have exercised the same beneficial effect on the Duchess’s mind, for she put up a hand to shade her eyes. Miss Penistone knew then what was amiss: she had had one of her bad nights, poor Elizabeth!

## Three

Sylvester made no further mention of his matrimonial plans; nor, since she could not fail to be cheerful whenever he came to visit her, did he suspect that his mother was troubled for him. Had he known it he would have supposed her merely to dislike the thought of his marriage, and would not have found it difficult to put any such scheme aside; if she had told him that she was more disturbed by the fear, which was taking uncomfortably strong possession of her mind, that he had become arrogant, he would have been distressed to think that he could have said anything to put such a notion into her head, and would have done his best to joke her out of it. He knew it to be false: he was acquainted with several persons to whom the epithet might well apply, and he thought them intolerable. Few men were more petted and courted than he; there were not many hostesses who would not have forgiven him such slights as were not uncommonly dealt them by spoiled men of rank and fashion. But no hostess would ever be given cause to complain of Sylvester's courtesy; and no insignificant person who perhaps rendered him a trifling service, or even did no more than touch his hat to him, would have reason to think himself despised. To reserve one's civility for people of consequence was a piece of ill-breeding, dishonourable to oneself, as disgusting as to make a parade of greatness, or to curse a servant for clumsiness. Sylvester, who did not arrive at parties very late, refuse to stand up for country-dances, take his bored leave within half an hour of his arrival, leave invitations unanswered, stare

unrecognisingly at one of his tenants, or fail to exchange a few words with every one of his guests on Public Days at Chance, was not very likely to believe that a charge of arrogance levelled against him was anything but a calumny, emanating probably from a tuft-hunter whom he had snubbed, or some pert mushroom of society whose pretensions he had been obliged to depress.

The Duchess knew this, and felt herself to be at a loss. She would have liked to have been able to consult with someone who had his interests as much to heart as herself, and must know better than she (since she never saw Sylvester but in her own apartments) how he conducted himself in society. There was only one such person; but although she felt both respect and affection for Lord William Rayne, Sylvester's uncle, and for two years his guardian, very little reflection was needed to convince her that any attempt to get him to enter into her rather vague apprehensions would only make him think her the victim of such crochets as might be expected to attack an invalid. Lord William was old-fashioned, very bluff and kind, but very full of starch as well. He had some influence over Sylvester, of whom he was as fond as he was proud: a word from him would carry weight, but unfortunately one of his terse reproofs would be more easily drawn from him by what he thought a failure on his nephew's part to remember his exalted station, than by his placing himself on too high a form.

He stayed at Chance at Christmas, and so far from affording the Duchess reassurance considerably depressed her, though this was far from being his intention. He had nothing but praise to bestow on Sylvester. He told the Duchess that the boy did just as he ought, his manners being particularly correct. 'Very affable and civil, you know, but knows how to keep a proper distance,' said Lord William. 'No need to fear he'll forget what he owes to his position, my dear sister! He tells me he's thinking of getting married. Very proper. High time he was setting up his nursery! He seems to be going about the business exactly as he should, but I dropped him a hint. Don't think it was necessary, mind, but I

shouldn't like to see him make a fool of himself for want of a word of advice. But thank the lord he's got no rubbishing romantical notions in his head!

It was the immutable custom of the House of Rayne for as many members of it as could possibly do so to gather together at Christmas under the roof of the head of the family. As the family was enormous, and most of those who congregated at Chance remained for a month, Sylvester had little leisure, and saw less of his mother than he liked. He was an excellent host, and he had an excellent supporter in his sister-in-law, who, besides having a turn for entertaining, very much enjoyed acting as deputy for the Duchess, and consequently became more cheerful as soon as the first of the visitors crossed the threshold. Her pleasure was only marred by Sylvester's refusal to invite Sir Nugent Fotherby to join the party. She argued that if he could invite her father and mother he could with equal propriety invite her affianced husband, but any intention she might have had of developing this grievance was checked by the intervention of both parents. Lord Elvaston, to whom Sir Nugent was objectionable, informed her that if he had found the fellow at Chance he would have gone home instantly, and Lady Elvaston, though willing to tolerate Sir Nugent for the sake of his vast wealth, told her that if she thought to win Sylvester round by affording him the opportunity of studying that amiable dandy at close quarters she was no better than a ninnyhammer.

Sylvester left Chance towards the end of January, a day later than his last, lingering guest. He was bound for Blandford Park, whither his hunters were sent by the direct route from Leicestershire; but he went first to London, a deviation that caused no surprise, since he told his mother he had business there. As it was hunting, not matrimony, that took him to Blandford Park she was able to see him off without any immediate apprehension of his proposing to one of the five eligible candidates for his hand. None of these ladies would be at Blandford Park; and it was in the highest degree unlikely that they were to be found in London either, at the end of January.

The Duchess believed he would be granted little opportunity to commit his contemplated imprudence until the beginning of the season. But he had omitted to tell her what was his chief business in town. He went to pay a morning visit to his godmother.

The Dowager Lady Ingham lived in Green Street, in a house bursting with all the furniture and ornaments she had insisted on removing from Ingham House on the occasion of her son's marriage, and her own retirement to Green Street. Any piece for which she had a fancy she insisted was her personal property; and since neither Ingham nor his gentle bride was a match for her she bore off several heirlooms, handsomely promising, however, to bequeath them to their rightful owner. She also removed the butler, but as he was growing old and was obstinate in his adherence to customs Lord Ingham thought obsolete, this was not felt to be a loss. He was now considerably stricken in years, went about his duties in a slow and stately manner, and discouraged the Dowager from holding any entertainments more arduous than a small *soirée*, or a card-party. Fortunately she had no wish to give dinner-parties, or breakfasts, excusing herself on the score of age and infirmity. She was not, in fact, much above five-and-sixty; and beyond a tendency to gout no one had any very clear idea of what her infirmities might be. She certainly walked with the aid of an ebony cane; and whenever she was confronted with any disagreeable form of exertion she was threatened with palpitations, and was obliged to send for Sir Henry Halford, who understood her constitution so well that he could always be depended on to recommend her to do precisely what she wished.

When Sylvester was ushered into her crowded drawing-room she greeted him with a snort; but she was pleased to receive a visit from him nevertheless; and after telling him acidly that she had well-nigh forgotten what he looked like she unbent sufficiently to give him her hand, and allow him to kiss it. Mollified by the grace with which he performed this courtesy she waved him to a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace and bade him tell her how his mother did.

‘I left her pretty well, I think,’ he answered. ‘But tell me, ma’am, how *you* do?’

She told him. The recital lasted for twenty minutes, and might have lasted longer had she not suddenly bethought herself of something she wanted to know. She broke off her account of her aches and ails abruptly, saying: ‘Never mind that! What’s this I’m hearing about your brother’s widow? The on-dit is that she’s going to marry a man-milliner. I knew his father: a namby-pamby creature *he* was, though he passed for an amiable man. They tell me the son is a Pink of the Ton. I suppose he has a genteel fortune? Old Fotherby should have cut up warm.’

‘Oh, as rich as Golden Ball!’ Sylvester replied.

‘Is he indeed? H’m!’ She was evidently impressed by this, but said after a reflective moment: ‘In a vast hurry to be married again, ain’t she? What happens to the boy?’

‘He will remain at Chance, of course.’

She stared at him. ‘What, is your poor mother to be charged with the care of him?’

‘No, certainly not.’ He held up his quizzing-glass, twisting it between finger and thumb, and watching the flash of firelight on its magnifying lens. ‘I am thinking of getting married myself, ma’am.’

‘Well, it’s high time,’ she responded snappishly. ‘The Torrington girl, I collect?’

‘I suppose she might answer the purpose – if I could be sure she would not be hipped at Chance. It is an object with me, you know, ma’am, to choose a wife who will be acceptable to my mother.’

If she thought this an odd reason for matrimony she did not say so. ‘Is your heart engaged?’ she demanded.

‘Not in the least,’ he replied. ‘You see what a quandary I am in! Do advise me!’

She did not speak for a minute, but he knew that she was on the alert, and was content to wait, idly swinging his quizzing-glass.

‘You can pour yourself out a glass of wine!’ she said suddenly. ‘I’ll take one too – though I don’t doubt I shall suffer for it.’

He rose, and crossed the room to where Horwich had set a silver tray on a side-table. When he came back to the fire, and put a glass of sherry into the Dowager's hand, he said lightly: 'Now, if you were only a fairy godmother, ma'am, you would wave your wand, and so conjure up exactly the bride I want!'

He returned to his chair as he spoke, and had embarked on a change of subject when she interrupted him, saying: 'I may not be able to wave a wand, but I daresay I could produce an eligible bride for you.' She set her glass down. 'What you want, Sylvester, is a pretty-behaved girl of good birth, good upbringing, and an amiable disposition. If your Uncle William were not a zany he would have arranged just such an alliance for you years ago, and you may depend upon it you would have been very comfortable in it. Well, *I* haven't meddled, though I own I've been tempted, when I've heard how you were making up to first this female and then that. However, you've now applied to me, and it's my belief that if you wish for a wife who will know what her duty is and be more acceptable than any other to your mother, you could do no better for yourself than to offer for my granddaughter. I don't mean one of Ingham's girls, but Phoebe: my Verena's child.'

He was extremely annoyed. His godmother was not playing the game as he had planned it. Those carefully casual words of his should have prompted her not to hold him up at the sword's point, but to have produced her granddaughter presently (at the start of the season, perhaps) for his inspection. There was a lack of finesse about her conduct of the affair which vexed and alarmed him; for while the notion of marrying the daughter of his mother's dear friend had taken possession of his mind its hold was not so strong that it could not speedily be broken by the discovery that Miss Marlowe was lacking in the qualities he considered indispensable in his wife. In Lady Ingham's bluntness he saw an attempt to force his hand, and nothing could more surely set up the back of a young man who had been, virtually, his own master from the time he was nineteen, and the master of a great many other persons as well. He said in a cool tone: 'Indeed? Have I met your granddaughter, ma'am? I think I have not.'