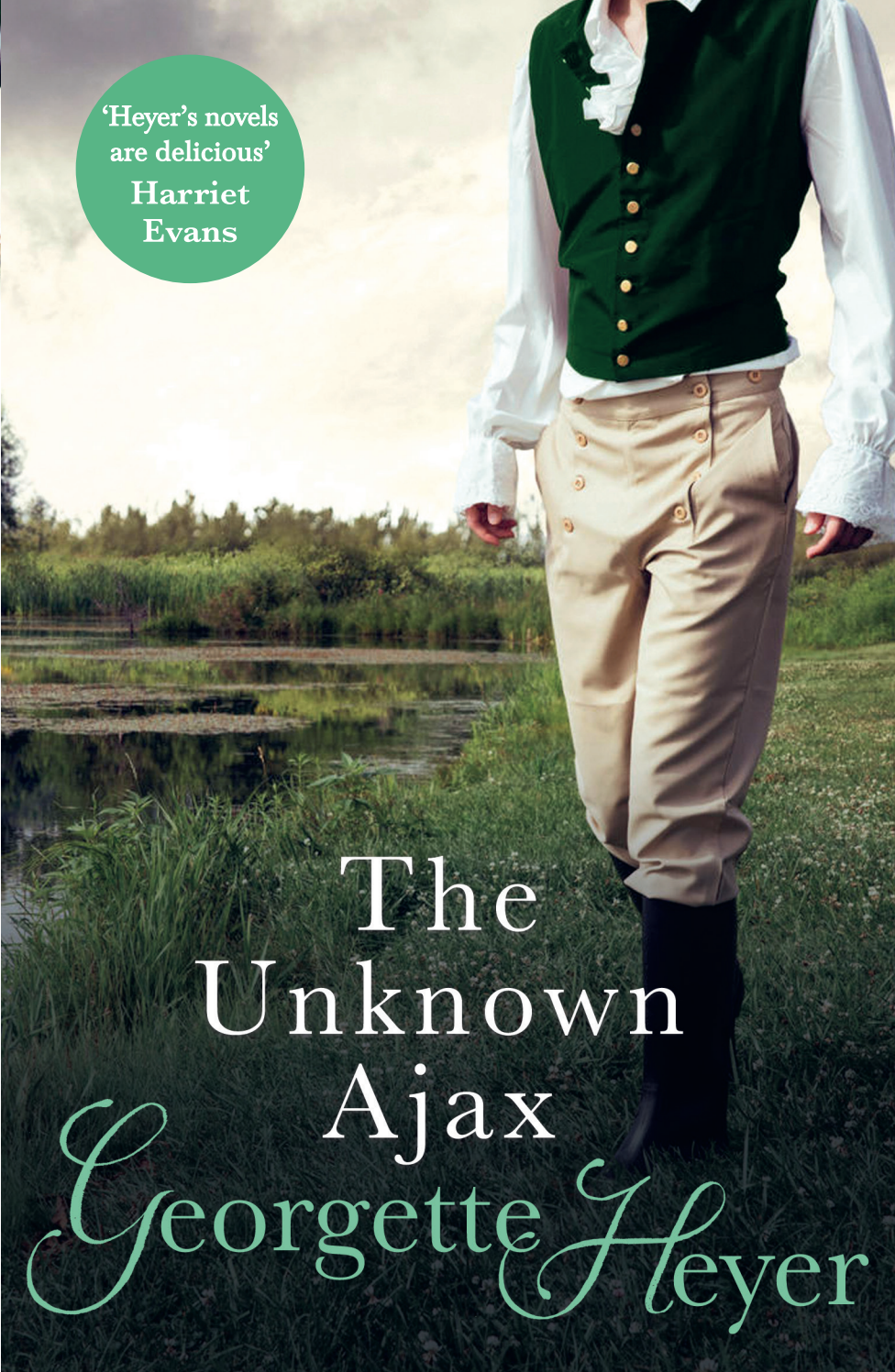

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The Unknown Ajax
Georgette Heyer

The Unknown Ajax

Author of over fifty books, Georgette Heyer is one of the best-known and best-loved of all historical novelists, making the Regency period her own. Her first novel, The Black Moth, published in 1921, was written at the age of seventeen to amuse her convalescent brother; her last was My Lord John. Although most famous for her historical novels, she also wrote twelve detective stories. Georgette Heyer died in 1974 at the age of seventy-one.

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First published in Great Britain by William Heinemann in 1959
First published by Arrow Books in 2005
This edition reissued by Arrow Books in 2021

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780099474364

Typeset by SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.



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One

Silence had reigned over the dining-room since his lordship, midway through the first course, had harshly commanded his widowed daughter-in-law to spare him any more steward's room gossip. As Mrs Darracott had merely been recounting to her daughter the tale of her activities that day the snub might have been thought unjust, but she accepted it, if not with equanimity, with a resignation born of custom, merely exchanging a droll look with her daughter, and directing one of warning at her handsome young son. The butler glanced menacingly at the younger of the two footmen, but the precaution was unnecessary: Charles had not been employed at Darracott Place above six months, but he was not such a whopstraw as to make the least noise in the performance of his duties when his lordship was out of humour. That was the way Chollacombe described as knaggy an old gager as ever Charles had had the ill-fortune to serve. Stiff-rumped, that's what he was, always nabbing the rust, or riding grub, like he had been for months past.

Charles had thought himself lucky to have been taken on at Darracott Place, but he wasn't going to stay above his twelve-month, not if he knew it! It might suit James, being Kentish born, to work in a great, rambling house stuck down miles from anywhere, in a marsh flat and bare enough to give anyone a fit of the blue devils, and with never a soul, outside the Family, coming next or nigh it, but when Charles went after another place he was going to London. Let alone he was always one for

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a bit of life, you could earn extra gelt in London, for there were always errands to be run, or notes to be delivered, and you got a shilling every time you were sent off to execute such commissions. If messages had to be carried in the country it stood to reason they were taken by one of the grooms; while as for the throng of open-fisted guests his dad had told him it would be his duty to wait upon – well, a houseful of guests might have been what his dad was used to in his day but it wasn't what they was used to at Darracott Place!

Such visions as Charles had indulged when he had first blessed his good fortune at being hired to fill the post of second footman in a nobleman's establishment! A proper take-in that had been, and so he would tell his dad! Dad, honourably retired from employment as butler to a Gentleman of Fashion, had assured him that to be hired to serve in a lord's country seat did not mean that he would be immured in rural fastness throughout the year. My lord (said Dad) would certainly retire to Kent during the winter months; but at the beginning of the Season he would remove to his London house; and at the end of the Season (said Dad) the chances were that he would hire a house in Brighton for the summer months. And from time to time, of course, he would be absent, visiting friends in other parts of the country, during which periods his servants would enjoy a great deal of leisure, and might even be granted leave to go on holiday.

But nothing like that had happened at Darracott Place since Charles had first entered its portals. My lord, whose grim mouth and arctic stare could set stronger knees than Charles's knocking together, remained in residence all the year round, neither entertaining nor being entertained. And no use for anyone to tell Charles that this was because the Family was in mourning for Mr Granville Darracott and his son, Mr Oliver, both drowned off the coast of Cornwall in an ill-fated boating expedition: Charles might only have been second footman at Darracott Place for a couple of months when that disaster occurred, but no one could gammon him into thinking that my lord cared a spangle for his heir. If you were to ask him, Charles would say that my lord

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cared for no one but Mr Richmond: he certainly couldn't abide Mr Matthew Darracott, who was the last of his sons left alive; while as for Mr Claud, who was the younger of Mr Matthew's two sons, it was as much as anyone could do not to burst out laughing to see my lord look at him as if he was a cockroach, or a bed-bug. Nor, though he didn't look at him like that, could you think he cared a groat for Mr Vincent neither; while as for poor Mrs Darracott, as kind a lady as you'd find anywhere, even if she was a bit of a prattle-box, it seemed like she had only to open her mouth for my lord to give her one of his nasty set-downs. He didn't, it was true, do that to Miss Anthea, but that was probably because Miss Anthea wasn't scared of him, like her Ma, and would maybe give as good as she got: it wasn't because he was fond of her, as you'd think her granddad would be. It wouldn't be Miss Anthea as would coax him out of his sullens; it would be Mr Richmond.

But Richmond, his grandfather's darling, after one thoughtful glance cast under his lashes at that uncompromising countenance appeared to lose himself in his own reflections. Some pickled crab, which he had not touched, had been removed with a damson pie; and his sister saw, peeping round the massive silver epergne that almost obscured him from her view, that he had eaten no more than a spoonful of this either. Since he had partaken quite liberally of two of the dishes that had made up the first course she was undismayed by anything other than her grandfather's failure to notice his present abstention. In general Lord Darracott would have bullied Richmond into eating the pie, imperfectly concealing his anxious affection for the youth, whose earlier years had been attended by every sort of ailment, under a hectoring manner, to which Richmond, docile yet unafraid, would submit.

As little as Charles the footman did Anthea, or Mrs Darracott, or even Richmond understand the cause of his lordship's brooding ill-humour; rather less than Charles did any one of these three believe that it sprang from grief at the death of his eldest son. His lordship had both disliked and despised Granville;

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yet when the news of that fatal accident had reached Darracott Place he had been for many minutes like a man struck to stone; and when he had recovered from the first shock he had horrified his son Matthew, and Lissett, his man of business, by saying several times over, and in a voice of icy rage: 'Damn him! Damn him! Damn him!' They had almost feared for his reason, and had stood staring at him with dropped jaws until he had violently ordered them out of his sight. Matthew had never dared to enquire what extraordinary circumstances had provoked this outburst, and his lordship neither offered an explanation nor again referred to the matter. Only a black cloud seemed to descend on him, rendering him more unapproachable than ever, and so brittle-tempered that Mrs Darracott quite dreaded having to address him, and even Richmond several times had his head bitten off.

Dinner was always a protracted meal; tonight it seemed interminable; but at last it came to an end. As the servants began to remove the covers, Mrs Darracott picked up her reticule, and rose.

His lordship's hard, frowning eyes lifted; he said curtly: 'Wait!'

'Wait, sir?' faltered Mrs Darracott.

'Yes, wait!' he repeated impatiently. 'Sit down! I have something to say to you!'

She sank back on to her chair, looking at once bewildered and apprehensive. Anthea, who had risen with her, remained standing, her head turned towards her grandfather, her brows a little raised. He paid no heed to her; his eyes were on the two footmen, and it was not until they had left the room that he spoke again. So forbidding was his expression that Mrs Darracott, in growing trepidation, began to search wildly in her mind for some forgotten error of omission or commission. Chollacombe softly shut the door on the heels of his subordinates, and picked up the port decanter from the sideboard; he perceived that his master's hands were clenching and unclenching on the arms of his chair, and his heart sank: there had been a storm brewing all day, and it was going to burst now over their heads.

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But when my lord again spoke it was as though it cost him an effort. He said: 'You will be good enough, Elvira, to inform Flitwick that I expect my son and his family here tomorrow. Make what arrangements you choose!'

She was so much surprised that she was betrayed into uttering an unwise exclamation. 'Good gracious! Is *that* all? But what in the world – I mean, I hadn't the least notion –'

'What brings them here, sir?' asked Anthea, intervening to draw her grandfather's fire.

He looked for a moment as though he were about to utter one of his rough snubs, but after a slight pause he answered her. 'They are coming because I've sent for them, miss!' He paused again, and then said: 'You may as well know now as later! I've sent for my heir as well.'

At these bitterly uttered words Chollacombe nearly dropped the decanter.

'Sent for your heir *as well*?' repeated Richmond. 'But my uncle Matthew is your heir, Grandfather – isn't he?'

'No.'

'Then who is, sir?' demanded Anthea.

'A weaver's brat!' he replied, his voice vibrant with loathing.

'Oh, *dear*!' said Mrs Darracott, breaking the stunned silence that succeeded his lordship's announcement.

The hopeless inadequacy of this exclamation dragged a choke of laughter out of Anthea, but it caused his lordship's smouldering fury to flare up. 'Is that all you have to say? Is that all, woman? You are a wet-goose – a widgeon – a – take yourself off, and your daughter with you! Go and chatter, and marvel, and bless yourselves, but keep out of my sight and hearing! By God, I don't know how I bear with you!'

'No, indeed!' said Anthea instantly. 'It is a great deal too bad, sir! Mama, how could you speak so to one so full of compliance and good nature as my grandfather? So truly the gentleman! Come away at once!'

'That's what you think of me, is it, girl?' said his lordship, a glint in his eyes.

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'Oh, no!' she responded, dropping him a curtsy. 'It's what I *say*, sir! You must known that my featherheaded mama has taught me to behave with all the propriety in the world! To tell you what I *think* of you would be to sink myself quite below reproach! Come, Mama!'

He gave a bark of laughter. 'Tongue-valiant, eh?'

She had reached the door, which Chollacombe was holding open, but she looked back at that. 'Try me!'

'I will!' he promised.

'Oh, Anthea, *pray* – !' whispered Mrs Darracott, almost dragging her from the room. She added, as Chollacombe closed the door behind them: 'My love, you *should* not! You know you should not! What, I ask you, would become of us if he were to cast us off?'

'Oh, he won't do that!' replied Anthea confidently. 'Even he must feel that once in a lifetime is enough for the performance of *that* idiocy! I collect that the *weaver's son* is the offspring of the uncle we are never permitted to mention? Who is he, and what is he, and – oh, come and tell me all about it, Mama! You know we have leave to marvel and chatter as much as we choose!'

'Yes, but I don't know anything,' objected Mrs Darracott, allowing herself to be drawn into one of the saloons that opened on to the central hall of the house. 'Indeed, I never knew of his existence until your grandfather threw him at my head in that scrambling way! And I consider,' she added indignantly, 'that I behaved with perfect propriety, for I took it with composure, and I'm sure it was enough to have cast me into strong hysterics! He would have been well-served if I had fallen senseless at his feet. I was never more shocked!'

A smile danced in her daughter's eyes, but she said with becoming gravity: 'Exactly so! But a well-bred ease of manner, you know, is quite wasted on my grandfather. Mama, when you ruffle up your feathers you look like a very pretty partridge!'

'But I am not wearing feathers!' objected the widow. 'Feathers for a mere family evening, and in the country, too! It would be

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quite ineligible, my love! Besides, you should not say such things!'

'No, very true! It was the stupidest comparison, for whoever saw a partridge in purple plumage? You look like a turtle-dove, Mama!'

Mrs Darracott allowed this to pass. Her mind, never tenacious, was diverted to the delicate sheen of her gown. She had fashioned it herself, from a roll of silk unearthed from the bottom of a trunk stored in one of the attics, and she was pardonably pleased with the result of her skill. The design had been copied from a plate in the previous month's issue of *The Mirror of Fashion*, but she had improved upon it, substituting some very fine Brussels lace (relic of her trousseau) for the chenille trimming of the illustration. Her father-in-law might apostrophize her as a wet-goose, but even he could scarcely have denied (had he had the least understanding of such matters) that she was a notable needlewoman. She was also a very pretty woman, with a plump, trim figure, large blue eyes, and a quantity of fair hair which was partially concealed under a succession of becoming caps. From the moment when she had detected a suspicion of sagging under her jaw she had made her caps to tie beneath her chin, or (more daringly) her ear; and the result was admirable. She was neither learned nor intelligent, but she contrived to dress both herself and her daughter out of a meagre jointure, supplying with her clever fingers what her purse could not buy; and she had never, during the twelve years of her widowhood, allowed either her father-in-law's snubs or the frequent discomforts of her situation to impair the amiability of her disposition. Her temper being cheerful, and the trend of her mind optimistic, she seldom fretted over the major trials which were beyond her power to mend. Her daughter, of whom she was extremely fond, was twenty-two years of age and still unwed; her spirited young son, whom she adored, was kept kicking his heels in idleness to serve his grandfather's caprice; but although she recognized that such a state of affairs was deplorable she could not help feeling that *something* would happen to make all right,

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and was able, without much difficulty, to put such dismal thoughts aside, and to expend her anxiety on lesser and more remediable problems.

Anthea's quizzing remark brought one of these to her mind. Smoothing a crease from the purple-bloom satin, she said very seriously: 'You know, dearest, it will be excessively awkward!'

'What will be awkward? The weaver's son?'

'Oh, him – ! No, poor boy – though of course it *will* be! I was thinking of your aunt Aurelia. I am persuaded she will expect to see us in mourning. You know what a high stickler she is for *every* observance! She will think it very odd of us to be wearing colours – even improper!'

'Not at all!' replied Anthea coolly. 'By the time my grandfather has demanded to be told what cause *she* has to wear mourning for my uncle and my cousin, and has made her the recipient of his views on females rigging themselves out to look like so many crows, she will readily understand why you and I have abstained from that particular observance.'

Mrs Darracott considered this rather dubiously. 'Well, yes, but there is no *depending* on your grandfather. I think we should at least wear black ribbons.'

'Very well, Mama, we will wear whatever you choose – at least, *I* will do so if *you* will stop teasing yourself about such fripperies and tell me about the weaver's son, and the uncle who must not be mentioned.'

'But I don't know anything!' protested Mrs Darracott. 'Only that he was the next brother to poor Granville, and quite your grandfather's favourite son. Your papa was used to say that that was what enraged Grandpapa so particularly, though for my part I can't believe that he held him in the slightest affection! Never, never could I bring myself to disown *my* son! Not though he married a *dozen* weaver's daughters!'

'Oh, I think we should be obliged to disown him if he married a dozen of them, Mama!' Anthea said, laughing. 'It would be quite excessive, and so embarrassing! Oh, no, don't frown at me! It don't become you, and I won't fun any more, I

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promise you! Is that what my uncle did? Married a weaver's daughter?'

'Well, that's what I was told,' replied Mrs Darracott cautiously. 'It all happened before I was married to your papa, so I am not perfectly sure. Papa wouldn't have spoken of it only that there was a notice of Hugh's death published in the *Gazette*, and he was afraid I might see it, and make some remark.'

'When did he die, Mama?'

'Now that I *can* tell you, for it was the very year I was married, and had just come back from my honeymoon to live here. It was in 1793. He was killed, poor man. I can't remember the name of the place, but I do know it was in Holland. I daresay we were engaged in a war there, for he was a military man. And I shouldn't be at all astonished, Anthea, if *that* is what makes your grandfather so determined Richmond shan't enter the army. I don't mean Hugh's being killed, but if he had not been a military man he would never have been stationed in Yorkshire, and, of course, if he had not been stationed there he would never have met that female, let alone have become so disastrously entangled. I believe she was a very low, vulgar creature, and lived in Huddersfield. I must own that it is not at all what one would wish for one's son.

'No, indeed!' Anthea agreed. 'What in the world can have possessed him to do such a thing? And he a Darracott!'

'Exactly so, my love! The most imprudent thing, for he cannot have supposed that your grandfather would forgive such a shocking misalliance! When one thinks how he holds up his nose at quite respectable persons, and never visits the Metropolis because he says it has grown to be full of mushrooms, and once-a-week beaux – ! I must say, I never knew anyone who set himself on such a high form. And then to have his son marrying a weaver's daughter! *Well!*'

'And to be obliged in the end to receive her son as his heir!' said Anthea. 'No wonder he has been like a bear at a stake all these months! Did he know, when my uncle and Oliver were drowned, how it was? Was that what made him so out of reason

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cross? Why has he waited so long before breaking it to us? Why– Oh, how provoking it is to think he won't tell us, and we dare not ask him!'

'Perhaps he will tell Richmond,' suggested Mrs Darracott hopefully.

'No,' Anthea said, with a decided shake of her head. 'Richmond won't ask him. Richmond never asks him questions he doesn't wish to answer, any more than he argues with him, or runs counter to him.'

'Dear Richmond!' sighed Mrs Darracott fondly. 'I am sure he must be the best-natured boy in the world!'

'Certainly the best-natured grandson,' said Anthea, a trifle dryly.

'Indeed he is!' agreed her mother. 'Sometimes I quite marvel at him, you know, for young men are not in general so tractable and good-humoured. And it is *not* that he lacks spirit!'

'No,' said Anthea. 'He doesn't lack spirit.'

'The thing is,' pursued Mrs Darracott, 'that he has the sweetest disposition imaginable! Only think how good he is to your grandfather, sitting with him every evening, and playing chess, which must be the dullest thing in the world! I wonder, too, how many boys who had set their hearts on a pair of colours would have behaved as beautifully as he did, when your grandfather forbade him to think of such a thing? I don't scruple to own to you, my love, that I was in a quake for days, dreading, you know, that he might do something foolish and hot-headed. After all, he *is* a Darracott, and even your uncle Matthew was excessively wild when he was a young man.' She sighed. 'Poor boy! It was a sad blow to him, wasn't it? It quite wrung my heart to see him so restless, and out of spirits, but thank heaven *that* is all over now, for I couldn't have borne it if your grandfather had agreed to let him join! I daresay it was just a boyish fancy – but Richmond has such good sense!'

Anthea looked up, as though she would have spoken; but she apparently thought better of the impulse, and closed her lips again.

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'Depend upon it,' said Mrs Darracott comfortably, 'he will never think of it again, once he has gone to Oxford. Oh dear, how we shall miss him! I don't know what I shall do!'

The crease which had appeared between Anthea's brows deepened. She said, after a moment's hesitation: 'Richmond has no turn for scholarship, Mama. He has failed *once*, and for my part I think he will fail again, because he doesn't wish to succeed. And here we are in September, so that he will be more than nineteen by the time he *does* go to Oxford – *if* he goes – and he will have spent another year here, with nothing to do but to –'

'Nothing of the sort!' interrupted Mrs Darracott, bristling in defence of her idol. 'He will be *studying*!'

'Oh!' said Anthea, in a colourless voice. She glanced uncertainly at her mother, again hesitated, and then said: 'Shall I ring for some working-candles, Mama?'

Mrs Darracott, who was engaged in darning, with exquisite stitches, the torn needlepoint lace flounce to a petticoat, agreed to this; and in a very short space of time both ladies were deedily employed: the elder with her needle, the younger with some cardboard, out of which she was making a reticule, in the shape of an Etruscan vase. This was in accordance with the latest mode; and, if *The Mirror of Fashion* were to be believed, any ingenious lady could achieve the desired result without the smallest difficulty. 'Which confirms me in the melancholy suspicion that I am quite lacking in ingenuity, besides having ten thumbs,' remarked Anthea, laying it aside as Chollacombe brought the tea-tray into the room.

'I think it will look very elegant when you have painted it, my love,' said Mrs Darracott consolingly. She looked up, and saw that Richmond had followed the butler into the room, and her face instantly became wreathed in smiles. 'Oh, Richmond! You have come to take tea with us! How charming this is!' A thought occurred to her; her expression underwent a ludicrous change; she said apprehensively: 'Does your grandfather mean to join us, dearest?'

He shook his head, but there was a gleam of mischief in his

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eyes, which did not escape his sister. His mother, less observant, said in a relieved tone: 'To be sure, he rarely does so, does he? Thank you, Chollacombe: nothing more! Now, sit down, Richmond, and *tell us*!'

'What, about the weaver's son? Oh, I can't! Grandpapa snapped my nose off, so we played backgammon, and I won, and then he said I might take myself off, because he wants to talk to you, Mama!'

'You *are* a detestable boy!' remarked Anthea. 'Mama, take care! you will spill that! Depend upon it, he only means to throw a great many orders at your head about the manner in which we are to entertain the heir.'

'Yes,' agreed Mrs Darracott, recovering her complexion. 'Of course! I wonder if I should go to him immediately, or whether –'

'No, you will first drink your tea, Mama,' said Anthea firmly. 'Did he tell you *nothing* about our unknown cousin, Richmond?'

'Well, only that he's a military man, and was in France, with the Army of Occupation, when my uncle Granville was drowned, and that he has written that he will visit us the day after tomorrow.'

'That must have been the letter James brought from the receiving-office, then!' exclaimed Mrs Darracott. 'Well, at least he can *write*! Poor young man! I can't but pity him, though I perfectly appreciate how provoking it is for us all that he should have been born. Still, even your grandfather can't blame him for that!'

'For shame, Mama! You are under-rating my grandfather in the most disrespectful way! Of course he can!'

Mrs Darracott could not help laughing at this, but she shook her head at her too-lively daughter as well, saying that she ought not to speak so saucily of her grandfather. After that she finished drinking her tea, begged Richmond not to go to bed before she returned from the ordeal before her, and went away to the library.

Anthea got up to fill her cup again. She glanced down at

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Richmond, sunk into a deep chair and smothering a yawn. 'You look to be three parts asleep. Are you?'

'No – yes – I don't know! I had one of my bad nights, that's all. Don't cosset me – and, for God's sake, don't say anything to Mama!'

'What a fortunate thing that you've warned me!' said Anthea, sitting down in her mother's vacated chair. 'I was just about to run after Mama, before procuring a composer for you.'

He grinned at her. 'Pitching it *too* rum!' he murmured. 'I wonder what Grandpapa *does* want to say to Mama?'

'I don't know, but I hope he may say it with civility! How *could* you stand there, and let him speak to her as he did at dinner, Richmond?'

'Well, *I* can't stop him! What's more, I've more sense than to rip up at him as *you* did! It only puts Mama into a quake, when she thinks he may fly into a passion with you or me: you should know that!'

'He doesn't like one the less for squaring up to him,' she said. 'I will allow him *that* virtue: I don't know that he has any other.'

'He may not like *you* less, but you're a female: the cases are different.'

'I don't think so. He liked Papa far more than he liked Uncle Granville or Uncle Matthew, but I can't tell you how often they were at outs. I daresay you might not remember, but –'

'Oh, don't I just!' he interrupted. 'Grandpapa abusing Papa like a pickpocket, Papa as mad as Bedlam, the pair of them brangling and brawling to be heard all over the house – ! *Not remember*? I don't remember anything half as well! Too well to court the same Turkish treatment that Papa got: you may be sure of *that*!'

She looked curiously at him. 'But you're not afraid of him, are you?'

'No, I'm not afraid of him, but I detest the sort of riot and rumpus he kicks up when he's in a rage. Besides, it doesn't answer: you'll get nothing out of Grandpapa if you come to cuffs with him. I'll swear he gives me more than ever he gave Papa!'

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She reflected that this was true. Lord Darracott, who grudged every groat he was obliged to spend on anything but his own pleasure, pandered to his favourite grandson's every extravagant whim. If coaxing did not move him, it was seldom that Richmond failed to bring him round his thumb by falling into a fit of despondency. That was how Richmond had come by the beautiful, headstrong colt he had himself broken and trained. He had coaxed in vain. 'Do you think I'll help you to break your neck, boy?' had demanded his lordship. Richmond had not persisted, and even so clearsighted a critic as his elder sister had been unable to accuse him of sulkiness. He was as docile as ever, as attentive to his grandfather, and quite uncomplaining. But he made it very evident that his spirits were wholly cast down; and within a week his dejection, besides throwing Mrs Darracott into high fidgets, had won the colt for him. Anything, said Lord Darracott, was better than to have the boy so languid and listless.

It had been to cajole him out of silent despair at being told that under no circumstances would my lord buy him a pair of colours that his yacht had been bestowed on him. Suddenly Anthea wondered if the possession of a sailing vessel had been what he had all the time desired. She turned her eyes towards him, and said abruptly: 'Do you still wish for a military career, Richmond?'

He had picked up one of the weekly journals from the table at his elbow, and was glancing through it, but he looked up quickly at that, his expressive eyes kindling. 'I don't care for anything else!'

'Then –'

'You needn't go on! Why don't I persist? Why don't I do this – or that – or the other? Because I know when my grandfather can't be persuaded by anything I could do or say! That's why! I'm under age – and if you are thinking that I might run off and take the King's shilling, it's the sort of hubble-bubble notion a female *would* get into her head! That's not how I wish to join! I – oh, stop talking about it! I *won't* talk about it! It's over and done with! I daresay I shouldn't have liked it, after all!'

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He turned back to his journal, hunching an impatient shoulder, and Anthea said no more, knowing that it would be useless. She was deeply troubled, however, and not for the first time. He was spoilt, and wilful, but she loved him, and was wise enough to realize that his faults sprang from his upbringing, and were to be laid at Lord Darracott's door.

He had been a sickly, undersized baby, succumbing to every childish ailment: not at all the sort of grandson that might have been expected to occupy Lord Darracott's heart. His lordship, indeed, had paid scant heed to him until it was forcibly borne in upon him that the frail scrap whom he despised was possessed of a demon of intrepidity. But from the day when a terrified groom had carried into the house a baby who screamed: 'Put me down, put me down! I *can* ride him! I *can*!' and had learned from this trembling individual that his tiny grandson had (by means unknown and unsuspected) got upon the back of one of his own hunters and put this great, rawboned creature at the gate that led out of the stableyard, he had adored Richmond. There had been no bones broken, but the child had been stunned by the inevitable fall, and shockingly bruised. 'Let me go!' he had commanded imperiously. 'I *will* ride him. I will, I will, I *will*!'

Nothing could have made a greater hit with my lord. Himself a man of iron nerve, he was at once surprised and exultant to discover in the weakling of the family a fearlessness that matched his own. There was no more talk of puling brats or miserable squeeze-crabs: thenceforward little Richmond figured in his grandfather's conversation as a right one, game as a pebble; and my lord, who had suffered scarcely a day's illness in his life, very soon became more morbidly anxious about the state of his darling's health than was Richmond's fond mama. Poor Mrs Darracott, labouring for six years under the stigma of being a doting idiot who cosseted her whelp to death, suddenly, and to her considerable bewilderment, underwent a transformation, changing, almost overnight, into an unnatural parent to whose callous neglect every one of her son's ailments could be attributed. She bore the slur with fortitude, too thankful for my

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lord's change of heart to resent the injustice to herself. She had dreaded the day when she would be forced to send her delicate son to Eton, but when that day dawned it had been my lord, not she, who had decreed that Richmond must be educated at home. At the time, Anthea, four years older than her brother, had been as glad as she that Richmond was not to be subjected to the rigours of boarding-school; it was not until several years had passed that she realized, looking back, that by the time he was eleven Richmond had largely outgrown his delicacy of constitution. Today, a little more than eighteen years old, he was certainly a thin youth, but he seemed to have no other weakness than a tendency towards insomnia. As a child, the slightest stir in his room had jerked him wide-awake, and this idiosyncrasy had remained with him, causing him to choose for his own a bedchamber as far removed from the main body of the house as was possible; to bolt his door; and to forbid his solicitous family to come near him once he had retired for the night. None of them ever did so, but it was only Anthea who suspected that the prohibition sprang from a strong dislike of being teased by offers of hot bricks, drops of laudanum, supporting broths, or saline draughts, rather than from an inability to drop off to sleep again once he had been roused. No one, she thought (but privately), who suffered from disturbed nights could be quite as energetic as Richmond.

He was certainly looking heavy-eyed this evening, yawning from time to time, as he flicked over the pages of the journal; but as he had begun to bring his hunters into condition, and had spent the morning at trotting exercise, following this up by soundly beating his sister in several games of battledore-and-shuttlecock, before going off to shoot rabbits in a turnip-field, it would have been surprising had he not looked weary at the end of the day.

He glanced up presently from the journal, as a thought occurred to him, and said, with a gleam of decidedly impish amusement: 'I wouldn't be in that fellow's shoes for a fortune, would you?'

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'Our unknown cousin? No, indeed I wouldn't! If he's not up to the rig, Grandpapa will behave abominably, and we shall all be put to the blush. What do you think he will be like, Richmond? It seems to me that if he's a military man he can't be *very* vulgar. Unless – good God, he isn't just a common soldier, is he?'

'Rifleman. No, of course he – Lord, I never thought of that!' said Richmond, in an awed tone. He grinned appreciatively. 'Well, if that *is* the way of it it *will* mean the devil to pay, won't it? I wonder if my uncle knows what Grandpapa has in store, or whether – Vincent, too! I'll tell you what, Anthea, I don't give a fig for Uncle Matthew, but I think it's a curst shame that Vincent should be cut out by this mushroom!'

She did not answer, for at that moment Mrs Darracott came back into the room.

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It was instantly apparent to her children that Mrs Darracott had not been summoned by her father-in-law to discuss such trivialities as the arrangements to be made for the reception of his heir. She was looking slightly dazed; but when Anthea asked her if my lord had been unkind, she replied in a flustered way: 'No, no! *Nothing* like that! Well, that is to say – except for – not that I regarded it, for it was nothing out of the ordinary, and I hope I know better than to take a pet over a trifle. I must own, too, that I can't be astonished at his being vexed to death over this business. It is excessively awkward! However, he doesn't lay the blame at *my* door: you mustn't think that!'

'I should think not indeed!' exclaimed Anthea, between amusement and indignation. 'How could he possibly do so?'

'No, very true, my love!' agreed Mrs Darracott. 'I thought that myself, but it did put me on the fidgets when Richmond said he wanted to see me, because, in general, you know, things I never even heard about turn out to be my fault. However, as I say, it wasn't so today. Now, where did I put my thimble? I must finish darning that shocking rent before your aunt arrives tomorrow.'

'No, that you shan't!' declared Anthea, removing the workbox out of her mother's reach. 'You are big with news, Mama!'

'I am sure I haven't the least guess why you should think so. And you shouldn't say things like that! It is most improper!'

'But not by half as improper as to try to bamboozle your

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children! Now, Mama, you know you can't do it! *What* has Grandpapa disclosed to you? Instantly tell us!'

'Nothing at all!' asserted the widow, looking ridiculously guilty. 'Good gracious, as though he ever told me anything! How can you be so absurd?'

'Now, that is trying it on much too rare and thick!' said Richmond accusingly.

'Foolish boy! You are as bad as your sister, and what your poor papa would think of you both, if he could hear you, I'm sure I don't know! And you ought to be in bed, Richmond! You look worn to a bone!'

At this, her masterful offspring converged upon her, Anthea sinking down on to a stool at her feet, and Richmond perching on the arm of her chair.

'And *we* don't know what poor Papa would think of you for shamming it so, dearest!' said Anthea. 'Grandpapa has told you all about the weaver's son. Confess!'

'No, no, I promise you he hasn't! He told me nothing about him – well, nothing to the purpose! Only when I ventured to ask him if it had not been a great shock to him to learn of the young man's existence, he said he had known of it for ever. My dears, would you have believed it? It seems that poor Hugh wrote to tell your grandfather of *this* Hugh's birth, twenty-seven years ago! And not a word has he uttered to a soul until today! Unless, of course, he disclosed the truth to Granville, but I am positive he never did so, for your aunt Anne and I were the closest friends, and she must have told me, if she had known anything about it. Oh dear, poor soul, I wonder how she does? I wonder how it will answer, living with her daughter and her son-in-law? To be sure, Sir John Caldbeck seemed a most amiable man, and I daresay *anything* was preferable to Anne than continuing here – though I always used to think that Grandpapa was by far more civil to her than –'

'Yes, Mama,' interrupted Anthea. 'But all this is fair and far off, you know! So Grandpapa has known from the start how it was, has he? We needn't marvel that he said nothing about it

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while my uncle Granville and Oliver were alive, but how can he have allowed my uncle Matthew to suppose all these months that he was now the heir to the barony? It is a great deal too bad, besides being quite crack-brained! Did he hope the young man might be dead? He can't, surely, have forgotten him!'

'Well, I fancy, from something he said to me just now, that he had the intention of disinheriting him, if it might be done, only from some cause or another – but I don't precisely understand about settlements, so – Or do I mean an entail? No, I don't *think* it was that, and naturally I shouldn't dream of asking your grandfather to explain, for nothing provokes him more than to be asked questions, though why it should I can't conjecture!'

'I didn't know one *could* cut out the heir to one's title,' objected Richmond.

'It seems to be established that Grandpapa, at all events, cannot,' said Anthea.

'Sequestration!' suddenly and triumphantly exclaimed Mrs Darracott. 'That was the word! I thought very likely it would come back to me, for very often things do, and sometimes, which always seems extraordinary to me, in the middle of the night! Well, that was it, only it can't be done, and so Grandpapa feels that there is nothing for it but to make the best of this young man.'

'Did he say that, Mama?' asked Anthea incredulously.

'Yes, he did,' nodded Mrs Darracott. 'Well, it was what he *meant*!'

'But what did he *say*?' demanded Richmond.

'Oh, I can't recall exactly what he said! Only he seems to think he might go off at any moment, though why he should I can't imagine, for I never knew anyone so hearty! In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if he – Well, never mind that! Dear me, I have forgotten what I was about to say!'

'It wouldn't surprise you if he outlived us all,' supplied Anthea helpfully.

'Certainly not!' stated Mrs Darracott, blushing. 'Such a thought never entered my head!'

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'Lord, what a rapper!' remarked Richmond, palliating this undutiful criticism by hugging her briefly. 'You're trying to cut a wheedle, but if you think you can turn *us* up sweet, you're a goose, Mama!'

'*Richmond!*'

'How many more times is Mama to tell you not to speak to her so saucily?' interpolated Anthea severely.

'You are two very silly, impertinent children!' said Mrs Darracott, trying not to laugh. 'And what your aunt Aurelia will think of you, if you talk in that improper style, makes me quite sick with apprehension!'

'We won't,' promised Anthea. 'We will remember that a want of conduct in us reflects directly upon you, love, and we will behave with all the propriety in the world.'

'*If* she stops trying to gammon us,' amended Richmond.

'Oh, that is understood! *How* does Grandpapa mean to make the best of our new cousin, Mama?'

'Well, my dears,' responded the widow, capitulating, 'he seems to think that it will be necessary to lick the unfortunate young man into shape. At least, that's what he said.'

'Unfortunate young man indeed!'

'I own, one can't but feel a great deal of compassion for him, yet it can't be denied that it *is* a severe trial for your grandfather to know that he must be succeeded by quite a *vulgar* person. I should be very much vexed myself, and heaven knows I don't set half the store by my consequence that your grandfather does! Oh dear, how uncomfortable it will be! I did hope, when I learned that he is a military man, that he might be quite gentlemanlike, but your grandfather says that the army has grown so large, on account of the war's having dragged on for such a time, that it is full of what he calls shabby-genteel officers – though how he should know that, when he never stirs from home, is more than I can tell! And to make it worse the poor man is in the wrong sort of regiment.'

'What?' ejaculated Richmond, kindling. 'He's in the 95th! A Light Division man! I should like to know what is wrong with that!'

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'Well, dearest, I don't know anything about such matters myself, but Grandpapa spoke of its being newfangled, which, of course, would account for his not liking it.'

'If that's the way my grandfather means to talk he'll make more of a Jack-pudding of himself than ever this cousin could, even if he is a rum 'un!' declared Richmond hotly. 'Of all the antiquated, top-lofty –'

'Well, don't put yourself in a passion!' recommended his sister. 'You cannot suppose that anything other than a cavalry regiment, or the 1st Foot Guards, would do for a Darracott!'

'Balderdash!' said Richmond. 'I don't mean I wouldn't wish for a cavalry regiment myself, but if I can't – *couldn't* – join one, I'd as lief be a Light Bob as anything else. And if Grandpapa says something slighting – oh, lord, I shan't know where to look! I wonder if this man marched to Talavera? Do you know that –' He broke off, seeing his mother look quickly up at him, a stricken expression in her face. 'Oh, well!' he said, shrugging. 'It's of no consequence – only I do hope to God Grandpapa doesn't make a cake of himself! Go on, Mama! How is our cousin to be licked into shape? Does my grandfather mean to undertake the task himself? The wretched victim will seize the first opportunity that offers of escaping from the home of his fathers!'

'Oh, no!' Mrs Darracott said. 'That is – no, I am persuaded your grandfather doesn't mean – He said something about Vincent's being able to *hint* him into the established mode.'

'Vincent! He won't do it!' said Richmond positively.

'No, well – well, at least your grandfather seems to feel that we ought, all of us, to use the young man kindly!' Mrs Darracott perceived that both her children were regarding her with a mixture of surprise and disbelief, and her colour rose. She began to rearrange the Paisley shawl she wore draped round her shoulders, and said, rather too airily: 'I am sure it is greatly to his credit, and not at all what one would have expected! Poor young man! Your cousin, I mean, not Grandpapa! I daresay he will feel sadly out of place here, and we must try to make him welcome. *I* shall certainly do so, and I hope you will, too, dearest Anthea.

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Grandpapa is – is particularly anxious that you should make yourself agreeable to him. Indeed, I don't know why you should not! Not that I mean . . .' Aware that two pairs of fine gray eyes were fixed on her face, she found herself unable to finish this sentence, and tried hurriedly to begin another. 'Dear me, how late it is! Anthea, my love, –'

'Mama!' uttered Anthea accusingly. 'If you don't tell me precisely what it was that my grandfather said to you I'll go to the library and ask him!'

This dreadful threat threw Mrs Darracott into instant disorder. She scolded a little, wept a little, asserted that my lord had said nothing at all, and ended by divulging to her children that my lord had conceived the happy notion of bringing about a match between his shabby-genteel heir and his only unmarried granddaughter. 'To keep him in the *Family*!' she explained earnestly.

That was all that was needed to send Richmond into shouts of laughter. His sister, in general a girl with a lively sense of the ridiculous, found herself easily able to withstand the infection of his laughter. She waited in ominous silence until his mirth abated, and then, transferring her gaze from him to her mother, asked with careful restraint: 'Does it ever occur to you, Mama, that my grandfather is a lunatic?'

'*Frequently!*' Mrs Darracott assured her. 'That is – oh, dear, what am I saying? Of course not! Perhaps he is a trifle *eccentric*!'

'Eccentric! He's a medieval bedlamite!' said Anthea, not mincing matters. 'Upon my word, this is beyond everything!'

'I was afraid you would not quite like it,' agreed her mother unhappily. 'Now, Richmond – ! You will be in whoops if you don't take care! Foolish boy! There is nothing to laugh at!'

'Let him go into whoops, Mama! They may *choke* him!'

Mrs Darracott was shocked by this unfeeling speech, but thought it wisest, after one glance at Anthea's stormy face, to beg Richmond to go away. He did go, but it was a moment or two before Anthea's wrath abated. She had jumped up from the footstool, and now took several turns about the room in a hasty,

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impetuous way which filled Mrs Darracott with foreboding. However, she soon recovered her temper, and, although still incensed, was presently able to laugh at herself. 'I should know better than to fly up into the boughs for anything that detestable old man could say or do! I beg your pardon, Mama, but it puts me in such a rage when he behaves as though he were the Grand Turk, and we a parcel of slaves – ! So I am to marry the weaver's son, am I? I collect that *I* have nothing to say in the matter: has the weaver's son? Has he been informed of the fate that awaits him?'

'Oh, no! That is – I *did* venture to suggest to your grandfather – But he said – you know his way! – that the poor young man would do as he was bid!'

'And he will!' said Anthea. 'That's to say, he'll try! Wretched, wretched man! I pity him with all my heart! He will be miserably ill-at-ease, miserably out of place, and will arrive to find himself under fire! Grandpapa will overawe him within five minutes! Mama, it is *infamous*! Did you tell my grandfather that I shouldn't consent to such a scheme?'

'Well – well, I didn't say *that*, precisely!' confessed Mrs Darracott, in acute discomfort. 'To own the truth, my love, I was so much taken-aback that –'

'Then I will, and immediately!' declared Anthea, going towards the door.

She was halted by a small, anguished shriek. 'Anthea, I forbid you – I implore you! – He would be so angry! He will say that he told me not to say one word to you about it, and he did!'

Anthea could not be impervious to this appeal. She paused; and, pursuing her advantage, Mrs Darracott said: 'My dearest, you have so much good sense! I know you will consider carefully before you – Not that I would urge you to marry him if you felt you couldn't like him! I promise you I would never, never – But what will you *do*, Anthea? Oh, my dearest child, I'm cast into despair whenever I think of it! You are two-and-twenty, and how can you hope to receive a respectable offer, when you never meet anyone but the Family, or go anywhere, or – And here is your

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grandfather saying that you frittered away your chances when he was so obliging as to frank you to a London Season, and so you must now be content with a husband of his choosing!'

'During my one Season,' said Anthea, in a level tone, 'I received two offers of marriage. One came from a widower, old enough, I conjecture, to have been my father. The other was from young Oversley, who, besides being next door to a moonling, had the fixed intention of continuing under his parents' roof. Between Grandpapa and Lady Aberford I am persuaded there wasn't the difference of a hair! I haven't watched the trials you've been made to endure only to stumble into the same snare, Mama!'

'No, and heaven knows, dear child, I must be the last person alive to wish to see you in such a situation,' sighed Mrs Darracott.

'I could, I think, have developed a *tendre* for Jack Froyle,' said Anthea reflectively. 'But he, you know, was obliged to hang out for a rich wife, and thanks to the improvidence for which the Darracotts are so justly famed my portion can't be called anything but paltry. Does Grandpapa consider that circumstance when he talks of the chances I have frittered away?'

'No, he doesn't!' replied Mrs Darracott, with unaccustomed bitterness. 'But *I* do, and it utterly sinks my spirits! That's why I can't help thinking that perhaps you ought not to set your face against this scheme of your grandfather's. Not until you have met your cousin, at all events, my love! Of course, if he should prove to be impossible – only, you know, he *is* a Darracott on *one* side!'

'The side I should like the least!' said Anthea.

'Yes, but – but you would be *established*!' Mrs Darracott pointed out. 'Even if the young man is a coxcomb, which I do pray he is not, *your* position as Lady Darracott would be one of the first respectability. Anthea, I cannot bear to see you dwindle into an old maid!'

Anthea could not help laughing at this impassioned utterance, but Mrs Darracott was perfectly serious, saying very earnestly:

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'How can you help but do so when no eligible gentleman ever *sees* you? Dear Anne was used to say that when Elizabeth and Caroline were off her hands she would invite you to stay in London, because she entered into all my sentiments on that head; but now that your uncle Granville is dead, and she has gone away into Gloucestershire, it would be useless to depend on her. Aurelia has still two daughters of her own to bring out, and although I *could* write to my brother –'

'On no account in the world!' exclaimed Anthea. 'My uncle is the most amiable soul alive, but I would far rather dwindle into an old maid than stay for as much as two days with my aunt Sarah! Besides, I don't think she could be prevailed upon to invite me.'

'No, nor do I: she is the most disagreeable woman! So what, I ask you, is to become of you? When Grandpapa dies we shall be obliged to leave Darracott Place, you know. We shall be reduced to seeking *lodgings*, very likely in some dreadful back-slum, and eat black puddings, and turn our dresses, and -'

A peal of laughter interrupted this dismal catalogue. 'Stop, stop, Mama, before you fall into an incurable fit of the blue-devils! We shall do nothing of the sort! With *your* skill in dressmaking, and *my* turn for making elegant reticules, we shall set up as mantua-makers. In Bath, perhaps, on Milsom Street: not a large establishment, but an excessively modish one. Shall we call it Darracott's, to enrage the Family, or would it be more tonnish to call ourselves Elvira? Yes, I'm persuaded we should make a hit as Elvira! Within a year every woman of fashion will patronize us, because we shall charge the most exorbitant prices, which will convince the world that we *must* be Top-of-the-Trees!'

Mrs Darracott, while deprecating such a nonsensical idea, could not help being strongly attracted by it. Anthea encouraged her to enlarge upon the daydream; and soon had the satisfaction of seeing her volatile parent restored to her usual optimism. Not until they retired to bed was the unknown cousin again mentioned. He came into Mrs Darracott's mind as she picked up her candle, and she ventured to beg Anthea not to speak of the

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matter to her grandfather. She was much relieved when Anthea, kissing her, and giving her shoulder a reassuring pat, replied: 'No, I shan't say anything to Grandpapa. I am sure it would be quite useless!'

Mrs Darracott, much cheered, was able then to go to bed with a quiet mind. She was too deeply occupied with household cares on the following morning to have a thought to spare for any other problems than which bedchamber it would be proper to allot to the heir; how best to hide from Lady Aurelia that there was not a linen sheet in the house which had not been darned; and whether the undergroom would be able to purchase in Rye enough lobsters to make, when elegantly dressed, a handsome side-dish for the second course at dinner that day. She, and Mrs Flitwick too, would have been glad to know for how many days my lord had invited five guests to say at Darracott Place, but neither considered for as much as a minute the eligibility of applying to him for information on this head. Nothing but a rough answer could be expected. My lord would be unable to understand what difference it could make to anyone. He would also be unable to understand why the addition of five persons to his household should make any appreciable difference to the cost of maintaining his establishment. As he would, at the same time, cut up very stiff indeed if fewer than seven or eight dishes were provided for each course, the task of catering to his satisfaction was one of the labours of Hercules. 'For, ma'am,' (as Mrs Flitwick sapiently observed) 'I dare not for my life tell Godney to use up the mutton in a nice haricot, or toss up some oysters in an escallop: his lordship will want everything to be of the best.'

It soon transpired that there was one thing which his lordship did not want to be of the best. When Mrs Darracott asked him if he wished Poor Granville's bedchamber to be prepared for the reception of his successor, his reply was explosive and unequivocal, and carried the rider that the weaver's brat would think himself palatially housed if put to sleep in one of the attics.

The first of the guests to arrive were Mr Matthew Darracott

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and Lady Aurelia. They came in their own travelling-carriage, drawn by a single pair of horses; and they reached Darracott Place shortly after noon, having left town the day before, and rested for the night at Tonbridge.

Of my lord's four sons, Matthew, the third, was the one who had caused him the least trouble and expense. His youthful peccadilloes had been of a venial nature, committed either in emulation of his elder brothers, or at their instigation. He had been the first to marry; and from the day that he led Lady Aurelia Holt to the altar his career had been at once blameless and successful. It had been a very good match, for although Lady Aurelia was not beautiful her fortune was respectable, and her connections excellent. She had also a forceful personality, and it was not long before Matthew, weaned from the Whiggish heresies in which he had been reared, found himself (under the aegis of his father-in-law) with his foot firmly set on the first rung of the political ladder. His progress thereafter had been steady; and although it seemed unlikely that he would ever achieve the topmost rungs of the ladder it was only during the brief reign of 'All the Talents' that he was out of office; and although there were those who did not scruple to stigmatize his continued employment as jobbery, no one could deny that he discharged his duties with painstaking honesty.

His political apostasy notwithstanding, it might have been expected that so worthy a son would have occupied the chief place in his father's affection. Unfortunately Lord Darracott was bored by virtue, and contemptuous of those whom he could bully. Matthew had always been the meekest of his sons, and although his marriage had rendered him to some extent independent of his father, he still accorded him a sort of nervous respect, obeying his periodic and imperious summonses with anxious promptitude, and saying yes and amen to his lordship's every utterance. His reward for this filial piety was to be freely apostrophized as a pudding-heart, with no more pluck in him than a dunghill cock. Since his conduct was largely governed by the precepts of his masterful and rigidly correct wife, my lord was

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able to add, with perfect truth, that he lived under the sign of the cat's foot.

What Lady Aurelia thought of my lord no one knew, for she had been reared in the belief that the head of a family was entitled to every observance of civility. So far as outward appearances went, she was a dutiful daughter-in-law, neither arguing with his lordship, nor encouraging Matthew to rebel against his autocratic commands. Simple-minded persons, such as Mrs Rupert Darracott, were continually astonished by Matthew's divergence, on all important issues, from his father's known prejudices; but Lord Darracott was not a simple-minded person, and he was well aware that however politely Lady Aurelia might defer to him it would be her dictates Matthew would obey in major matters. In consequence, he held her in equal respect and dislike, and never lost an opportunity to plant what he hoped would be a barb in her flesh.

According to Granville, whose own son had found little favour in his grandfather's eyes, it was with this amiable intention that my lord encouraged Vincent in a career which his parents were known to think ruinous. More charitable persons suspected that in Vincent my lord saw a reflection of his own youth; but, as Granville once bitterly remarked, it was strange, if that were so, that my lord's feeling for him fell far short of the doting fondness he lavished on Richmond.

It must have been apparent to the most casual observer that Matthew Darracott was labouring under a strong sense of ill-usage. He was rather a stout man, not quite as tall as his father, or any of his brothers, and with a chubby countenance. When he was pleased he looked what nature had intended him to be: a placid man with a kindly, easy-going disposition; but when harassed his expression changed to one of peevishness, a frown dragging his brows together, and a pronounced pout giving him very much the look of a thwarted baby.

As he climbed down from the carriage, he saw that Chollacombe was waiting by the open door of the house. Leaving James, the footman, to assist Lady Aurelia to alight, he

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trod up the shallow terrace steps, exclaiming: 'This is a damned thing, Chollacombe! Where's my father?'

'His lordship went out with Mr Richmond, sir, and is not yet come in,' replied the butler.

'Has that fellow – *I* don't know what he calls himself! – Has he arrived here?'

'No, sir. You are the first to arrive. As you no doubt know, Mr Matthew, we are expecting Mr Vincent and Mr Claud also, but –'

'Oh, them!' said Matthew, dismissing his sons with an impatient shrug.

By this time he had been joined by his wife. She never reproved him in public, and she did not now so much as glance at him, but said majestically: 'Good day, Chollacombe. I hope I see you well?'

'Very well, thank you, my lady. Mrs Darracott is in the Green Saloon, I fancy. Perhaps your ladyship would –'

He broke off, for at that moment Mrs Darracott came hurrying across the hall. 'Oh, Matthew! My dear Aurelia! How glad I am to see you! I did not expect you would be so early – but so delightful!'

'We lay at Tonbridge,' said Lady Aurelia, presenting her cheek to her sister-in-law. 'I do not care to travel above thirty or forty miles at a stretch: it does not agree with my constitution.'

'No, it is very disagreeable!' agreed Mrs Darracott. 'The road from Tonbridge, too, is so horridly rough! I am sure –'

'Elvira!' interrupted Matthew, thrusting his hat into James' hand, 'what do you know about this appalling business?'

'Oh, my dear Matthew, *nothing*! That is, only – But won't you come into the Green Saloon? Unless you would wish to take off your bonnet and pelisse, Aurelia? I will take you upstairs – not that there is any *need* to escort you, for you must feel yourself to be quite as much at home as I am.'

This, however, her ladyship disclaimed, saying graciously that she considered herself a guest in the house, her sister-in-law being its unquestionable mistress. Mrs Darracott, though

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