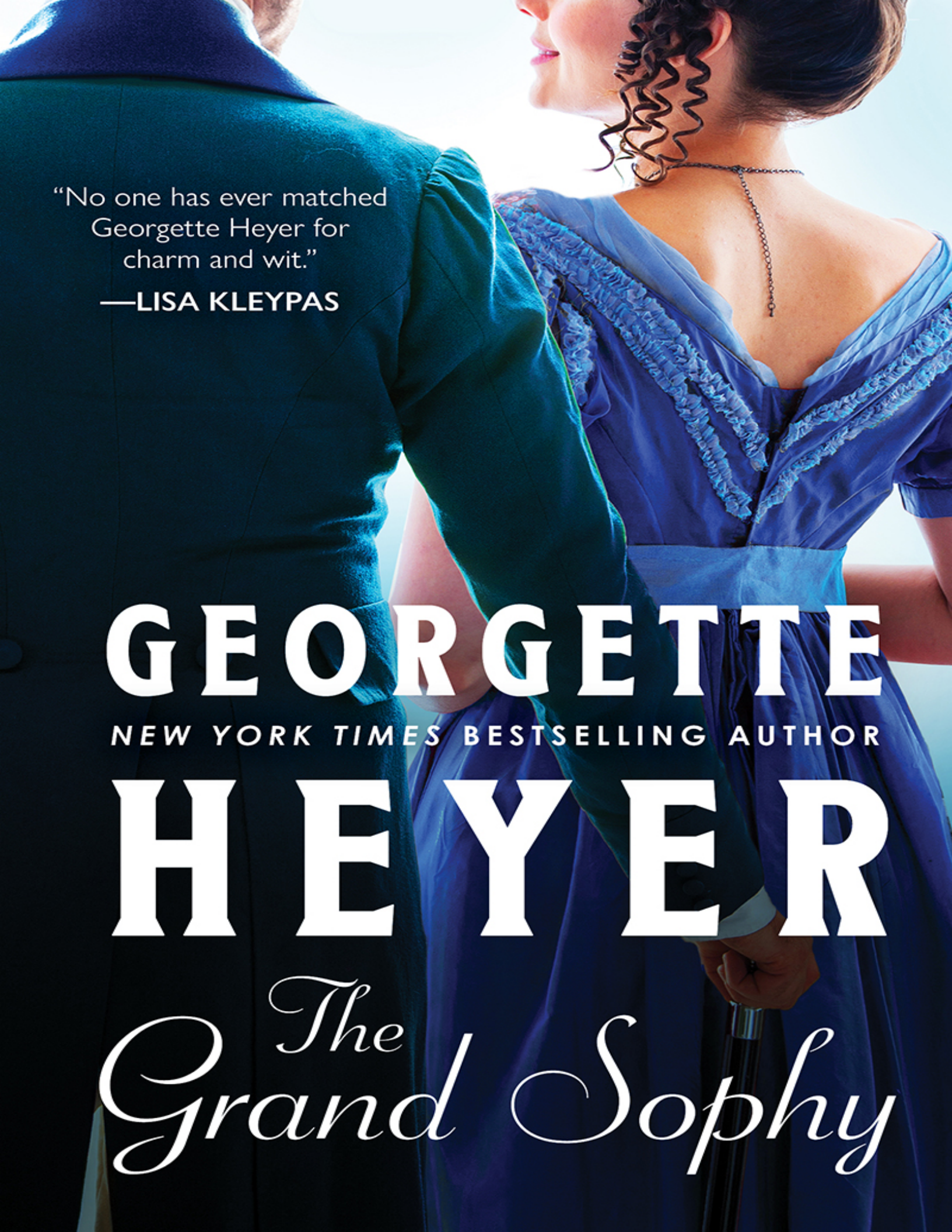




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Grand Sophy*

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The Grand Sophy

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HEYER**

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One

The butler, recognising her ladyship's only surviving brother at a glance, as he afterwards informed his less percipient subordinates, favoured Sir Horace with a low bow, and took it upon himself to say that my lady, although not at home to less nearly-connected persons, would be happy to see him. Sir Horace, unimpressed by this condescension, handed his caped greatcoat to one footman, his hat and cane to the other, tossed his gloves onto the marble-topped table, and said that he had no doubt of that, and how was Dassett keeping these days? The butler, torn between gratification at having his name remembered and disapproval of Sir Horace's free and easy ways, said that he was as well as could be expected, and happy (if he might venture to say so) to see Sir Horace looking not a day older than when he had last had the pleasure of announcing him to her ladyship. He then led the way, in a very stately manner, up the imposing stairway to the Blue Saloon, where Lady Ombersley was dozing gently on a sofa by the fire, a Paisley shawl spread over her feet, and her cap decidedly askew. Mr Dassett, observing these details, coughed, and made his announcement in commanding accents: 'Sir Horace Stanton-Lacy, my lady!'

Lady Ombersley awoke with a start, stared for an uncomprehending moment, made an ineffective clutch at her cap, and uttered a faint shriek. 'Horace!'

'Hallo, Lizzie, how are you?' said Sir Horace, walking across the room, and bestowing an invigorating buffet upon her shoulder.

‘Good heavens, what a fright you gave me!’ exclaimed her ladyship, uncorking the vinaigrette which was never out of her reach.

The butler, having tolerantly observed these transports, closed the door upon the reunited brother and sister, and went away to disclose to his underlings that Sir Horace was a gentleman as lived much abroad, being, as he was informed, employed by the Government on Diplomatic Business too delicate for their understanding.

The diplomatist, meanwhile, warming his coat-tails by the fire, refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff and told his sister that she was putting on weight. ‘Not growing any younger, either of us,’ he added handsomely. ‘Not but what I can give you five years, Lizzie, unless my memory’s at fault, which I don’t think it is.’

There was a large gilded mirror on the wall opposite to the fireplace, and as he spoke Sir Horace allowed his gaze to rest upon his own image, not in a conceited spirit, but with critical approval. His forty-five years had treated him kindly. If his outline had thickened a little, his height, which was well above six foot, made a slight portliness negligible. He was a very fine figure of a man, and had, besides a large and well-proportioned frame, a handsome countenance, topped by luxuriant brown locks as yet unmarred by silver streaks. He was always dressed with elegance, but was by far too wise a man to adopt such extravagances of fashion as could only show up the imperfections of a middle-aged figure. ‘Take a look at poor Prinny!’ said Sir Horace to less discriminating cronies. ‘He’s a lesson to us all!’

His sister accepted the implied criticism unresentfully. Twenty-seven years of wedlock had left their mark upon her; and the dutiful presentation to her erratic and far from grateful spouse of eight pledges of her affection had long since destroyed any pretensions to beauty in her. Her health was indifferent, her disposition compliant, and she was fond of saying that when one was a grandmother it was time to be done with thinking of one’s appearance.

‘How’s Ombersley?’ asked Sir Horace, with more civility than interest.

‘He feels his gout a little, but considering everything he is remarkably well,’ she responded.

Sir Horace took a mere figure of speech in an undesirably literal spirit, saying with a nod: ‘Always did drink too much. Still, he must be going on for sixty now, and I don’t suppose you have so much of the other trouble, do you?’

‘No, no!’ said his sister hastily. Lord Ombersley’s infidelities, though mortifying when conducted, as they too often were, in the full glare of publicity, had never greatly troubled her, but she had no desire to discuss them with her outspoken relative, and gave the conversation an abrupt turn by asking where he had come from.

‘Lisbon,’ he replied, taking another pinch of snuff.

Lady Ombersley was vaguely surprised. It was now two years since the close of the long Peninsular War, and she rather thought that, when last heard of, Sir Horace had been in Vienna, no doubt taking mysterious part in the Congress, which had been so rudely interrupted by the escape of that dreadful Monster from Elba. ‘Oh!’ she said, a little blankly. ‘Of course, you have a house there! I was forgetting! And how is dear Sophia?’

‘As a matter of fact,’ said Sir Horace, shutting his snuff-box, and restoring it to his pocket, ‘it’s about Sophy that I’ve come to see you.’

Sir Horace had been a widower for fifteen years, during which period he had neither requested his sister’s help in rearing his daughter nor paid the least heed to her unsolicited advice, but at these words an uneasy feeling stole over her. She said: ‘Yes, Horace? Dear little Sophia! It must be four years or more since I saw her. How old is she now? I suppose she must be almost out?’

‘Been out for years,’ responded Sir Horace. ‘Never anything else really. She’s twenty.’

‘Twenty!’ exclaimed Lady Ombersley. She applied her mind to arithmetic, and said: ‘Yes, she must be, for my own Cecilia is just turned nineteen, and I remember that your Sophia was born almost a year before. Dear me, yes! Poor Marianne! What a lovely creature she was, to be sure!’

With a slight effort Sir Horace conjured up the vision of his dead wife. 'Yes, so she was,' he agreed. 'One forgets, you know. Sophy's not much like her: favours me!'

'I know what a comfort she must have been to you,' sighed Lady Ombersley. 'And I'm sure, dear Horace, that nothing could be more affecting than your devotion to the child!'

'I wasn't in the least devoted,' interrupted Sir Horace. 'I shouldn't have kept her with me if she'd been troublesome. Never was: good little thing, Sophy!'

'Yes, my dear, no doubt, but to be dragging a little girl all over Spain and Portugal, when she would have been far better in a select school –'

'Not she! She'd have learnt to be missish,' said Sir Horace cynically. 'Besides, no use to prose to me now on that head: it's too late! The thing is, Lizzie, I'm in something of a fix. I want you to take care of Sophy while I'm in South America.'

'South America?' gasped Lady Ombersley.

'Brazil. I don't expect to be away very long, but I can't take my little Sophy, and I can't leave her with Tilly, because Tilly's dead. Died in Vienna, couple of years ago. A devilish inconvenient thing to do, but I daresay she didn't mean it.'

'Tilly?' said Lady Ombersley, all at sea.

'Lord, Elizabeth, don't keep on repeating everything I say! Shocking bad habit! Miss Tillingham, Sophy's governess!'

'Good heavens! Do you mean to tell me that the child has no governess now?'

'Of course she has not! She don't need a governess. I always found plenty of chaperons for her when we were in Paris, and in Lisbon it don't signify. But I can't leave her alone in England.'

'Indeed, I should think not! But, my dearest Horace, though I would do anything to oblige you, I am not quite sure –'

'Nonsense!' said Sir Horace bracingly. 'She'll be a nice companion for your girl – what's her name? Cecilia? Dear little soul, you know: not an ounce of

vice in her!’

This fatherly tribute made his sister blink, and utter a faint protest. Sir Horace paid no heed to it. ‘What’s more, she won’t cause you any trouble,’ he said. ‘She has her head well on her shoulders, my Sophy. I never worry about her.’

An intimate knowledge of her brother’s character made it perfectly possible for Lady Ombersley to believe this, but since she herself was blessed with much the same easy-going temperament, no acid comment even rose to her lips. ‘I am sure she must be a dear girl,’ she said. ‘But, you see, Horace –’

‘And another thing is that it’s time we were thinking of a husband for her,’ pursued Sir Horace, seating himself in a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace. ‘I knew I could depend on you. Dash it, you’re her aunt! My only sister, too.’

‘I should be only too happy to bring her out,’ said Lady Ombersley wistfully. ‘But the thing is I don’t think – I am rather afraid – You see, what with the really dreadful expense of presenting Cecilia last year, and dearest Maria’s wedding only a little time before that, and Hubert’s going up to Oxford, not to mention the fees at Eton for poor Theodore –’

‘If it’s expense that bothers you, Lizzie, you needn’t give it a thought, for I’ll stand the nonsense. You won’t have to present her at Court: I’ll attend to all that when I come home, and if you don’t want to be put to the trouble of it then I can find some other lady to do it. What I want at this present is for her to go about with her cousins, meet the right set of people – you know the style of thing!’

‘Of course I know, and as for *trouble* it would be no such thing! But I can’t help feeling that perhaps – perhaps it would not do! We do not entertain very much.’

‘Well, with a pack of girls on your hands you ought to,’ said Sir Horace bluntly.

‘But, Horace, I have not got a pack of girls on my hands!’ protested Lady Ombersley. ‘Selina is only sixteen, and Gertrude and Amabel are barely out of the nursery!’

‘I see what it is,’ said Sir Horace indulgently. ‘You’re afraid she may take the shine out of Cecilia. No, no, my dear! My little Sophy’s no beauty. She’s well enough – in fact, I daresay you’ll think she’s a very pretty girl – but Cecilia’s something quite out of the common way. Remember thinking so when I saw her last year. I was surprised, for you were never above the average yourself, Lizzie, while I always thought Ombersley a plain-looking fellow.’

His sister accepted these strictures meekly, but was quite distressed that he should suppose her capable of harbouring such unhandsome thoughts about her niece. ‘And even if I was so odious, there is no longer the least need for such notions,’ she added. ‘Nothing has as yet been announced, Horace, but I don’t scruple to tell you that Cecilia is about to contract a very eligible alliance.’

‘That’s good,’ said Sir Horace. ‘You’ll have leisure to look about you for a husband for Sophy. You won’t have any difficulty: she’s a taking little thing, and she’ll have a snug fortune one of these days, besides what her mother left her. No need to be afraid of her marrying to disoblige us, either: she’s a sensible girl, and she’s been about the world enough to be well up to snuff. Whom have you got for Cecilia?’

‘Lord Charlbury has asked Ombersley’s permission to address her,’ said his sister, swelling a little with pride.

‘Charlbury, eh,’ said Sir Horace. ‘Very well indeed, Elizabeth! I must say, I didn’t think you’d catch much of a prize, because looks aren’t everything, and from the way Ombersley was running through his fortune when I last saw him –’

‘Lord Charlbury,’ said Lady Ombersley a little stiffly, ‘is an extremely wealthy man, and, I know, has no such vulgar consideration in mind. Indeed, he told me himself that it was a case of love at first sight with him!’

‘Capital!’ said Sir Horace. ‘I should suppose him to have been hanging out for a wife for some time – thirty at least, ain’t he? – but if he has a veritable *tendre* for the girl, so much the better! It should fix his interest with her.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Lady Ombersley. ‘And I am persuaded they will suit very well. He is everything that is amiable and obliging, his manners most gentleman-like, his understanding decidedly superior, and his person such as must please.’

Sir Horace, who was not much interested in his niece’s affairs, said: ‘Well, well, he is plainly a paragon, and we must allow Cecilia to think herself fortunate to be forming such a connection! I hope you may manage as prettily for Sophy!’

‘Indeed, I wish I might!’ she responded, sighing. ‘Only it is an awkward moment, because – The thing is, you see, that I am afraid Charles may not quite like it!’

Sir Horace frowned in an effort of memory. ‘I thought his name was Bernard. Why shouldn’t he like it?’

‘I am not speaking of Ombersley, Horace. You must remember Charles!’

‘If you’re talking about the eldest boy of yours, of course I remember him! But why has he to say anything, and why the devil should he object to my Sophy!’

‘Oh, no, not to her! I am sure he could not do so! But I fear he may not like it if we are to be plunged into gaiety just now! I daresay you may not have seen the announcement of his own approaching marriage, but I should tell you that he has contracted an engagement to Miss Wraxton.’

‘What, not old Brinklow’s daughter? Upon my word, Lizzie, you have been busy to some purpose! Never knew you had so much sense! Eligible, indeed! You are to be congratulated!’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Ombersley. ‘Oh, yes! Miss Wraxton is a most superior girl. I am sure she has a thousand excellent qualities. A most well-informed mind, and principles such as must command respect.’

‘She sounds to me like a dead bore,’ said Sir Horace frankly.

‘Charles,’ said Lady Ombersley, staring mournfully into the fire, ‘does not care for very lively girls, or – or for any extravagant folly. I own, I could wish Miss Wraxton had rather more *vivacity* – but you are not to regard that, Horace, for I had never the least inclination towards being a blue-stocking

myself, and in these days, when so many young females are wild to a fault, it is gratifying to find one who – Charles thinks Miss Wraxton's air of grave reflection very becoming!' she ended, in rather a hurry.

'You know, Lizzie, it's a queer thing that any son of yours and Ombersley's should have grown into such a dull stick,' remarked Sir Horace dispassionately. 'I suppose you didn't play Ombersley false, did you?'

'Horace!'

'No, I know you didn't! No need to fly into a pucker! Not with your eldest: you know better than that! Still, it is an odd circumstance: often thought so! He can marry his blue-stocking, and welcome, for anything I care, but none of this explains why you should be caring a fig for what he likes or don't like!'

Lady Ombersley transferred her gaze from the glowing coals to his face. 'You do not perfectly understand, Horace.'

'That's what I said!' he retorted.

'Yes, but – Horace, Matthew Rivenhall left his whole fortune to Charles!'

Sir Horace was generally accounted an astute man, but he appeared to find it difficult correctly to assimilate this information. He stared fixedly at his sister for a moment or two, and then said: 'You don't mean that old uncle of Ombersley's?'

'Yes, I do.'

'The Nabob?'

Lady Ombersley nodded, but her brother was still not satisfied. 'Fellow who made a fortune in India?'

'Yes, and we always thought – but he said Charles was the only Rivenhall other than himself who had the least grain of sense, and he left him everything, Horace! *Everything!*'

'Good God!'

This ejaculation seemed to appear to Lady Ombersley as fitting, for she nodded again, looking at her brother in a woebegone fashion, and twisting the fringe of her shawl between her fingers.

'So it is Charles who calls the tune!' said Sir Horace.

‘No one could have been more generous,’ said Lady Ombersley unhappily. ‘We cannot but be sensible of it.’

‘Damn his impudence!’ said Sir Horace, himself a father. ‘What’s he done?’

‘Well, Horace, you might not know it, because you are always abroad, but poor Ombersley had a great many debts.’

‘Everyone knows that! Never knew him when he wasn’t under a cloud! You’re not going to tell me the boy was fool enough to settle ’em?’

‘But, Horace, someone had to settle them!’ she protested. ‘You can have no notion how difficult things were becoming! And with the younger boys to establish creditably, and the dear girls – it is no wonder that Charles should be so anxious that Cecilia should make a good match!’

‘Providing for the whole pack, is he? More fool he! What about the mortgages? If the greater part of Ombersley’s inheritance had not been entailed he would have gambled the whole away long since!’

‘I do not properly understand entails,’ said his sister, ‘but I am afraid that Charles did not behave just as he should over it. Ombersley was very much displeased – though I shall always say that to call one’s first-born a serpent’s tooth is to use quite unbecoming language! It seems that when Charles came of age he might have made everything quite easy for his poor papa, if only he had been in the least degree obliging! But nothing would prevail upon him to agree to break the entail, so all was at a standstill, and one cannot blame Ombersley for being vexed! And then that odious old man died –’

‘When?’ demanded Sir Horace. ‘How comes it about that I never heard a word of this before today?’

‘It was rather more than two years ago, and –’

‘That accounts for it, then: I was devilish busy, dealing with Angoulême, and all that set. Must have happened at the time of Toulouse, I dare swear. But when I saw you last year you never spoke a word, Lizzie!’

She was stung by the injustice to this, and said indignantly: ‘I am sure I don’t know how I should have been thinking of such paltry things, with that Monster at large, and the Champ de Mars, and the banks suspending

payment, and heaven knows what beside! And you coming over from Brussels without a word of warning, and sitting with me a bare twenty minutes! My head was in a whirl, and if I answered you to the point it is more than I would have bargained for!’

Sir Horace, disregarding this irrelevancy, said, with what for him was strong feeling: ‘Outrageous! I don’t say Ombersley’s not a shocking loose-screw, because there’s no sense in wrapping plain facts up in clean linen, but to be cutting a man out of one’s will and setting up his son to lord it over him – which I’ll be bound he does!’

‘No, no!’ expostulated Lady Ombersley feebly. ‘Charles is fully sensible of what is due to his father! It is not that he is ever lacking in respect, I do assure you! Only poor Ombersley cannot but feel it a little, now that Charles has taken everything into his own hands.’

‘A pretty state of affairs!’

‘Yes, but one comfort is that it is not generally known. And I cannot deny that in some ways it is by far more pleasant. You would scarcely credit it, Horace, but I do believe there is not an unpaid bill in the house!’ A moment’s reflection caused her to modify this statement. ‘At least, I cannot answer for Ombersley, but all those dreadful household accounts, which Eckington – you remember our good Eckington, Ombersley’s agent? – used to pull such a face over; and the fees at Eton and Oxford – *everything*, my dear brother, Charles takes care of!’

‘You aren’t going to tell me Charles is fool enough to fritter away old Matt Rivenhall’s fortune paying all the expenses of this barrack of a house!’ exclaimed Sir Horace.

‘No. Oh, no! I have not the least head for business, so it is of no use to ask me to explain it to you, but I believe that Charles persuaded his father to – to allow him to administer the estate.’

‘Blackmailed him into it, more like!’ said Sir Horace grimly. ‘Rare times we live in! Mind, I see the boy’s point, Lizzie, but, by God, I’m sorry for you!’

‘Oh, pray believe it’s no such thing!’ cried Lady Ombersley, distressed. ‘I did not wish you to think – to give you cause to suppose that Charles is ever

disagreeable, for indeed he is not, except when he is put out of temper, and one must own that he has a great deal to try his patience! Which is why I can't but feel, dear Horace, that if he does not like me to take charge of Sophia for you, I ought not to tease him!

'Fiddlesticks!' said Sir Horace. 'And why shouldn't he like it?'

'We – we decided not to give any parties this season, beyond what must be thought necessary. It is a most unfortunate circumstance that Charles's wedding has had to be postponed, on account of a bereavement Miss Wraxton has suffered. One of Lady Brinklow's sisters, and they will not be out of black gloves for six months. You must know that the Brinklows are very particular in all matters of correct conduct. Eugenia goes only to very quiet parties, and – and naturally one must expect Charles to partake of her sentiments!'

'Lord, Elizabeth, a man don't have to wear black gloves for the aunt of a female he ain't even married to!'

'Of course not, but Charles seemed to feel – and then there is Charlbury!'

'What the devil ails him?'

'Mumps,' replied Lady Ombersley tragically.

'He?' Sir Horace burst out laughing. 'Well, what a fellow he must be to have mumps when he should be getting married to Cecilia!'

'Really, Horace, I must say that I think that most unjust of you, for how could he help it? It is so mortifying for him! And, what is more, excessively unfortunate, because I don't doubt that had he been able to attach Cecilia – which I am sure he must have done, for nothing could be more amiable than his disposition, while his manners and address are just what they ought to be! But girls are so foolish, and take romantical notions into their heads, besides all kinds of encroaching fancies – however, I am happy to think that Cecilia is not one of those dreadful modern misses, and of course she will be guided by her parents! But no one can deny that nothing could be more ill-timed than Charlbury's mumps!'

Sir Horace, once more opening his snuff-box, regarded her with an amused and sapient eye. 'And what is Miss Cecilia's particular encroaching

fancy?’ he enquired.

Lady Ombersley knew that her eldest son would have counselled her to preserve a discreet silence; but the impulse to unburden herself to her brother was too strong to be denied. She said: ‘Well, you will not repeat it, I know, Horace, but the fact is that the silly child thinks she is in love with Augustus Fawnhope!’

‘One of Lutterworth’s boys?’ asked Sir Horace. ‘I don’t think much of that for a match, I must say!’

‘Good heavens, don’t mention such a thing! The youngest son, too, with not the least expectation in the world! But he is a poet.’

‘Very dangerous,’ agreed Sir Horace. ‘Don’t think I ever saw the boy: what’s he like?’

‘Quite beautiful!’ said Lady Ombersley, in despairing accents.

‘What, in the style of Lord Byron? That fellow has a great deal to answer for!’

‘N-no. I mean, he is as fair as Cecilia is herself, and he doesn’t limp, and though his poems are very pretty, bound up in white vellum, they don’t seem to *take* very well. I mean, not at all like Lord Byron’s. It seems sadly unjust, for I believe it cost a great deal of money to have them printed, and he had to bear the whole – or, rather, Lady Lutterworth did, according to what I have heard.’

‘Now I come to think of it,’ said Sir Horace, ‘I do know the boy. He was with Stuart, in Brussels last year. If you take my advice, you’ll marry Cecilia off to Charlbury as quickly as you can!’

‘Well, and so I would, if only – that is to say, of course I would not, if I thought she held him in aversion! And you must see, Horace, that it is quite out of my power to do anything of the sort when he is in bed with the mumps!’

Sir Horace shook his head. ‘She will marry the poet.’

‘Do not say so! But Charles thinks that I should do wisely not to take her where she is bound to meet the young man, which is another reason why we are living in a quiet style for the present. It is of all things the most awkward!’