

One

*M*rs Wetherby was delighted to receive a morning call from her only surviving brother, but for the first half hour of his visit she was granted no opportunity to do more than exchange a few commonplaces with him over the heads of her vociferous offspring.

Sir Gareth Ludlow had arrived in Mount Street just as the schoolroom party, comprising Miss Anna, a lively damsel within a year of her *débût*, Miss Elizabeth, and Master Philip, were returning from a promenade in the park under the aegis of their governess. No sooner did these delicately nurtured children catch sight of their uncle's tall, elegant figure than they threw to the winds every precept of gentility, so carefully instilled into their heads by Miss Felbridge, and, with piercing shrieks of: 'Uncle Gary, Uncle Gary!' raced helter-skelter down the street, to engulf Sir Gareth on their doorstep. By the time Miss Felbridge, clucking but indulgent, had overtaken them, the butler was holding open the door, and Sir Gareth was being borne into the house by his enthusiastic young relatives. He was being pelted with questions and confidences, his eldest niece hanging affectionately on one arm, and his youngest nephew trying to claim his attention by tugging violently at the other, but he disengaged himself for long enough to offer his hand to Miss Felbridge, saying with the smile which never failed to set her heart fluttering in her chaste bosom: 'How do you do? Don't scold them! It is quite my fault – though why I should have this shocking effect upon them I can't conceive! Are you quite well

again? You were suffering all the discomfort of a bad attack of rheumatism when last we met.'

Miss Felbridge blushed, thanked, and disclaimed, thinking that it was just like dear Sir Gareth to remember such an unimportant thing as the governess's rheumatism. Any further interchange was cut short by the arrival on the scene of Mr Leigh Wetherby, who erupted from the library at the back of the house, exclaiming: 'Is that Uncle Gary? Oh, by Jove, sir, I'm devilish glad to see you! There's something I particularly wish to ask you!'

The whole party then swept Sir Gareth upstairs to the drawing-room, all talking at the tops of their voices, and thus deaf to a halfhearted attempt on Miss Felbridge's part to restrain her charges from bursting in upon their mama in this very irregular fashion.

It would have been useless to have persisted, of course. The young Wetherbys, from Leigh, undergoing the rigours of coaching to enable him to embark upon a University career later in the year, to Philip, wrestling with pothooks and hangers, were unanimous in giving it as their considered opinion that nowhere was there to be found a more admirable uncle than Sir Gareth. An attempt to whisk the younger members off to the schoolroom could only have resulted in failure, or, at the best, in a fit of prolonged sulks.

In the well-chosen words of Mr Leigh Wetherby, Sir Gareth was the most bang-up fellow that ever drew breath. A noted Corinthian, he was never too high in the instep to show a nephew aspiring to dandyism how to arrange his neckcloth. Master Jack Wetherby, unconcerned with such fopperies as this, spoke warmly of his openhandedness and entire comprehension of the more urgent needs of young gentlemen enduring the privations of life at Eton College. Miss Anna, by no means out yet, knew no greater source of joy and pride than to be taken up to sit beside him in his curricule for a turn or two round the Park, the envy (she was convinced) of every other, less favoured, damsel. As for Miss Elizabeth, and Master Philip, they regarded

him as a fount of such dizzy delights as visits to Astley's Amphitheatre, or a Grand Display of Fireworks, and could perceive no fault in him.

They were not singular: very few people found fault with Gareth Ludlow. Watching him, as he contrived, while displaying over and over again for the edification of little Philip the magical properties of his repeating watch, to lend an ear to the particular problem exercising Leigh's mind, Mrs Wetherby thought that you would be hard put to it to find a more attractive man, and wished, as she had done a thousand times before, that she could discover some bride for him lovely enough to drive out of his heart the memory of his dead love. Heaven knew that she had spared no pains during the seven years that had elapsed since Clarissa's death to accomplish this end. She had introduced to his notice any number of eligible females, several of them as witty as they were beautiful, but she had never been able to detect in his grey eyes so much as a flicker of the look that had warmed them when they had rested on Clarissa Lincombe.

These reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Mr Wetherby, a dependable-looking man in the early forties, who grasped his brother-in-law's hand, saying briefly: 'Ha, Gary! Glad to see you!' and lost no time in despatching his offspring about their several businesses. This done, he told his wife that she shouldn't encourage the brats to plague their uncle.

Sir Gareth, having regained possession of his watch and his quizzing-glass, slipped the one into his pocket, and hung the other round his neck by its long black riband, and said: 'They don't plague me. I think I had better take Leigh along with me to Crawley Heath next month. A good mill will give him something other to think of than the set of his coats. No, I know you don't approve of prize-fighting, Trixie, but you'll have the boy trying to join the dandy-set if you don't take care!'

'Nonsense! You don't wish to burden yourself with a scrubby schoolboy!' said Warren, imperfectly concealing his gratification at the invitation.

‘Yes, I do: I like Leigh. You needn’t fear I shall let him get into mischief: I won’t.’

Mrs Wetherby broke in on this, giving utterance to the thought in her mind. ‘Oh, my dear Gary, if you knew how much I long to see you with a son of your own to indulge!’

He smiled at her. ‘Do you, Trixie? Well, as it chances, it is that subject which has brought me to see you today.’ He saw the look of startled consternation in her face, and burst out laughing. ‘No, no, I am not about to disclose to you the existence of a lusty love-child! Merely that I believe – or rather, that I hope – I may shortly be demanding your felicitations.’

She was for a moment incredulous, and then cried eagerly: ‘Oh, Gary, is it Alice Stockwell?’

‘Alice Stockwell?’ he repeated, surprised. ‘The pretty child you have been throwing in my way? My dear! No!’

‘Told you so,’ remarked Mr Wetherby, with quiet satisfaction.

She could not help feeling a little disappointed, for Miss Stockwell had seemed to be of all her protégées the most eligible. She concealed this very creditably, however, and said: ‘I declare I have not the least guess, then, who it may be. Unless – oh, do, pray, tell me at once, Gary!’

‘Why, yes!’ he replied, amused at her eagerness. ‘I have asked Brancaster’s leave to address myself to Lady Hester.’

The effect of this announcement was somewhat disconcerting. Warren, in the act of taking a pinch of snuff, was surprised into sniffing far too violently, and fell into a fit of sneezing; and his lady, after staring at her brother as though she could not believe her ears, burst into tears, exclaiming: ‘Oh, Gary, *no!*’

‘Beatrix!’ he said, between laughter and annoyance.

‘Gareth, are you hoaxing me? Tell me it’s a take-in! Yes, of course it is! You would never offer for Hester Theale!’

‘But, Beatrix –!’ he expostulated. ‘Why should you hold Lady Hester in such aversion?’

‘Aversion! Oh, no! But a girl – *girl?* She must be nine-and-twenty if she’s a day! – a woman who has been on the shelf these nine years, and more, and never *took*, or had *countenance*, or the

least degree of modishness – You must be out of your senses! You must *know* you have only to throw the handkerchief – Oh, dear, how could you do such a thing?’

At this point, her helpmate thought it time to intervene. Gareth was beginning to look vexed. A charming fellow, Gary, with as sweet a temper as any man alive, but it was not to be expected that he would bear with complaisance his sister’s strictures on the lady whom he had chosen to be his bride. Why, from among all the females only too ready to receive the addresses of a handsome baronet of birth and fortune, he should have selected Hester Theale, who had retired after several unsuccessful seasons to make way for her more marriageable sisters, was certainly a baffling problem, but not one into which Warren thought it seemly to inquire. He therefore cast an admonitory look at his wife, and said: ‘Lady Hester! I am not particularly acquainted with her, but I believe her to be an unexceptionable young woman. Brancaster accepted your offer, of course.’

‘Accepted it?’ said Beatrix, emerging from her handkerchief. ‘Jumped at it, you mean! I imagine he must have swooned from the shock!’

‘I wish you will be quiet!’ said Warren, exasperated by this intransigent behaviour. ‘Depend upon it, Gary knows what will suit him better than you can! He is not a schoolboy, but a man of five-and-thirty. No doubt Lady Hester will make him an amiable wife.’

‘No doubt!’ retorted Beatrix. ‘Amiable, and a dead bore! No, Warren, I will not hush! When I think of all the pretty and lovely girls who have done their best to attach him, and he tells me that he has offered for an insipid female who has neither fortune nor any extraordinary degree of beauty, besides being stupidly shy and dowdy, I – oh, I could go into strong hysterics!’

‘Well, if you do, Trixie, I give you fair warning that I shall empty over you the largest jug of water I can find!’ responded her brother with unimpaired cordiality. ‘Now, don’t be such a goose, my dear! You are putting poor Warren to the blush.’

She sprang up, and grasped the lapels of his exquisitely cut coat of blue superfine, giving him a shake, and looking up into his smiling eyes with the tears still drowning her own. ‘Gary, you do not love her, nor she you! I have never seen the least sign that she regards you even with partiality. Only tell me what she has to offer you!’

His hands came up to cover hers, removing them from his lapels, and holding them in a strong clasp. ‘I love you dearly, Trixie, but I can’t permit you to crumple this coat, you know. Weston made it for me: one of his triumphs, don’t you think?’ He hesitated, seeing that she was not to be diverted; and then said, slightly pressing her hands: ‘Don’t you understand? I had thought that you would. You have told me so many times that it is my duty to marry – and, indeed, I know it is, if the name is not to die with me, which I think would be a pity. If Arthur were alive – but since Salamanca I’ve known that I can’t continue all my days in single bliss. So –!’

‘Yes, yes, but why *this* female, Gary?’ she demanded. ‘She has nothing!’

‘On the contrary, she has breeding, and good manners, and, as Warren has said, an amiable disposition. I hope I have as much to offer her, and I wish that I had more. But I have not.’

The tears sprang to her eyes again, and spilled over. ‘Oh, my dearest brother, *still*? It is more than seven years since –’

‘Yes, more than seven years,’ he interrupted. ‘Don’t cry, Trixie! I assure you I don’t grieve any longer, or even think of Clarissa, except now and then, when something occurs which perhaps brings her to my memory. But I have never fallen in love again. Not with any of the delightful girls you have been so obliging as to cast in my way! I believe I could never feel for another what I once felt for Clarissa, so it seems to me that to be making a bid for the sort of girl you would wish me to marry would be a shabby thing to do. I have a fortune large enough to make me an eligible suitor, and I daresay the Stockwells would give their consent, were I to offer for Miss Alice –’

‘Indeed they would! And Alice is disposed to have a *tendre* for you, which you must have perceived. So, why –?’

‘Well, for that very reason, perhaps. Such a beautiful and spirited girl is worthy of so much more than I could give her. Lady Hester, on the other hand –’ He broke off, the ready laughter springing into his eyes. ‘What a wretch you are, Trix! You are forcing me to say such things as must make me sound like the veriest coxcomb!’

‘What you mean,’ said Beatrix ruthlessly, ‘is that Lady Hester is too insipid to like anyone!’

‘I don’t mean anything of the sort. She is shy, but I don’t think her insipid. Indeed, I have sometimes suspected that if she were not for ever being snubbed by her father, and her quite odious sisters, she would show that she has a lively sense of the ridiculous. Let us say, merely, that she has not a romantic disposition! And as I must surely be considered to be beyond the age of romance, I believe that with mutual liking to help us we may be tolerably comfortable together. Her situation now is unhappy, which encourages me to hope that she may look favourably upon my proposal.’

Mrs Wetherby uttered a scornful exclamation, and even her stolid spouse blinked. That he rated his very obvious attractions low was one of the things one liked in Gary, but this was coming it a trifle too strong. ‘No doubt of that,’ Warren said dryly. ‘May as well wish you happy at once, Gary – which I’m sure I hope you will be. Not but what – However, it is no business of mine! You know best what will suit you.’

It was not to be expected that Mrs Wetherby could bring herself to agree with this pronouncement; but she appeared to realize the futility of further argument, and beyond prophesying disaster she said no more until she was alone with her husband. She had then a great deal to say, which he bore with great patience, entering no caveat until she said bitterly: ‘How any man who had been betrothed to Clarissa Lincombe could offer for Hester Theale is something I shall never understand – nor anyone else, I daresay!’

At this point, Warren's brow wrinkled, and he said in a dubious tone: 'Well, I don't know.'

'I should think not, indeed! Only consider how lovely Clarissa was, and how gay, and how spirited, and then picture to yourself Lady Hester!'

'Yes, but that ain't what I meant,' replied Warren. 'I'm not saying Clarissa wasn't a regular out-and-outer, because the lord knows she was, but, if you ask me, she had too much spirit!'

Beatrix stared at him. 'I never heard you say so before!'

'Haven't said it before. Not the sort of thing I should say when Gary was betrothed to her, and no use saying it when the poor girl was dead. But what I thought was that she was devilish headstrong, and would have led Gary a pretty dance.'

Beatrix opened her mouth to refute this heresy, and shut it again.

'The fact is, my dear,' pursued her lord, 'you were in such high gig because it was your brother who won her that you never could see a fault in her. Mind, I'm not saying that it wasn't a triumph, because it was. When I think of all the fellows she had dangling after her – lord, she could have been a duchess if she'd wanted! Yeovil begged her three times to marry him: told me so himself, at her funeral. Come to think of it, it was the only piece of good sense she ever showed, preferring Gary to Yeovil,' he added thoughtfully.

'I know she was often a little wild, but so very sweet, and with such engaging ways! I am persuaded she would have learnt to mind Gary, for she did most sincerely love him!'

'She didn't love him enough to mind him when he forbade her to drive those greys of his,' said Warren grimly. 'Flouted him the instant his back was turned, and broke her neck into the bargain. Well, I was devilish sorry for Gary, but I don't mind owing to you, Trix, that I thought he was better out of the affair than he knew.'

Upon reflection, Mrs Wetherby was obliged to acknowledge that there might be a certain amount of justice in this severe stricture. But it in no way reconciled her to her brother's

approaching nuptials to a lady as sober as the dead Clarissa had been volatile.

Seldom had a betrothal met with more general approval than that of Gareth Ludlow to Clarissa Lincombe, even the disappointed mothers of other eligible damsels thinking it a perfect match. If the lady was the most courted in town, the gentleman was Society's best liked bachelor. Indeed, he had seemed to be the child of good fortune, for he was not only endowed with a handsome competence and an impeccable lineage, but possessed as well as these essentials no common degree of good looks, a graceful, well-built frame, considerable proficiency in the realm of sport, and an open, generous temper which made it impossible for even his closest rivals to grudge him his success in winning Clarissa. Sadly Mrs Wetherby looked back to that halcyon period, before the fatal carriage accident had laid Clarissa's charm and beauty in cold earth, and Gareth's heart with them.

He was thought to have made an excellent recovery from the blow; and everyone was glad that the tragedy had not led him to indulge in any extravagance of grief, such as selling all his splendid horses, or wearing mourning weeds for the rest of his life. If, behind the smile in his eyes, there was a little sadness, he could still laugh; and if he found the world empty, that was a secret he kept always to himself. Even Beatrix, who adored him, had been encouraged to hope that he had ceased to mourn Clarissa; and she had spared no pains to bring to his notice any damsel who seemed likely to captivate him. Not the mildest flirtation had rewarded her efforts, but this had not unduly depressed her. However modest he might be, he could not but know that he was regarded as a matrimonial prize of the first rank; and she knew him too well to suppose that he would raise in any maidenly breast expectations which he had no intention of fulfilling. Until this melancholy day, she had merely thought that she had not hit upon the right female, never that the right female did not exist. Her tears, on hearing his announcement, had sprung less from disappointment than from the sudden realization that more than Clarissa's loveliness had perished in

that fatal accident of seven years ago. He had spoken to her as a man might who had put his youth behind him, with all its hopes and ardours, and was looking towards a placid future, comfortable perhaps, but unenlivened by any touch of romance. Mrs Wetherby, perceiving this, and recalling a younger Gareth, who had seen life as a gay adventure, cried herself to sleep.

So, too, when the news of Sir Gareth's very flattering offer was later made known to her, did the Lady Hester Theale.

TWO

The Earl of Brancaster's family seat was situated not many miles from Chatteris, in the heart of the fens. The mansion was as undistinguished as the surrounding countryside, and, since his lordship's circumstances, owing to his strong predilection for gaming, were straitened, it bore a good many signs of neglect. In theory, it was presided over by his lordship's eldest daughter, but as his son and heir, Lord Widmore, found it expedient to reside, with his wife and growing family, under his father's roof, the Lady Hester's position was, in fact, little better than that of a cipher. Upon the death of her mama, several years previously, persons who were not particularly acquainted with the Earl had thought that it was fortunate, after all, that she had been left on the shelf. She would be able, said the optimistic, to comfort her stricken parent, and to take her mama's place as the mistress of Brancaster Park, and of the house in Green Street. But as the Earl had disliked his wife he was by no means stricken by her death; and as he was looking forward to an untrammelled single existence he regarded his eldest daughter not as a comfort but as an encumbrance. Indeed, he had been heard to say, when in his cups, that he was no better off than before.

His feelings, when, recovering from a momentary stupefaction, he realized that Sir Gareth Ludlow was actually soliciting permission to marry his daughter, almost overcame him. He had given up all hope of seeing her respectably married: that she should achieve a brilliant match had never for an instant

occurred to him. An unwelcome suspicion that Sir Gareth must be a trifle bosky crossed his mind, but there was nothing in Sir Gareth's manner or appearance to lend the slightest colour to it, and he banished it. He said bluntly: 'Well, I should be very well pleased to give her to you, but I'd better tell you at the outset that her portion isn't large. In fact, I shall be devilish hard put to it to raise the wind at all.'

'It is really quite immaterial,' responded Sir Gareth. 'If Lady Hester will do me the honour to accept me, I shall of course make whatever settlement upon her that our attorneys think proper.'

Greatly moved by these beautiful words, the Earl gave Sir Gareth's suit his blessing, invited him to Brancaster Park the following week, and himself cancelled three sporting engagements, leaving London on the very next day to prepare his daughter for the singular stroke of good fortune which was about to befall her.

Lady Hester was surprised by his sudden arrival, for she had supposed him to be on the point of going to Brighton. He belonged to the Prince Regent's set, and in general was to be found, during the summer months, residing in lodgings on the Steyne, or at the Pavilion itself, where it was his affable practice to share in all his royal friend's more expensive pastimes, and to play whist, for extremely high stakes, with his royal friend's brother of York. Such female companionship as he sought in Brighton had never included that of his wife, or of his daughter; so, at the end of the London Season, Lady Hester had removed, with her brother and her sister-in-law, to Cambridgeshire, whence, in due course, she would proceed on a round of yearly and very dull visits to various members of her family.

Her amiable parent, having informed her that it was a father's concern for her welfare which had brought him, at great inconvenience, to his ancestral home, said, by way of preamble to the disclosure he was about to make, that he hoped she would furbish herself up a trifle, since it would not do for her to receive guests in an old gown, and a Paisley shawl.

‘Oh, dear!’ said Hester. ‘Are we to have visitors?’ She focused her slightly myopic gaze upon the Earl, and said, with more resignation than anxiety to her voice: ‘I do hope no one whom I *particularly* dislike, Papa?’

‘Nothing of the sort!’ he replied testily. ‘Upon my soul, Hester, you are enough to try the patience of a saint! Let me tell you, my girl, that it is Sir Gareth Ludlow whom we are to entertain here next week, and if you dislike him you must be out of your senses!’

She had been somewhat aimlessly disposing the despised shawl about her shoulders, as though, by rearranging its shabby folds, she could render it less objectionable to her father, but at these words she let her hands fall, and said incredulously: ‘*Sir Gareth Ludlow*, sir?’

‘Ay, you may well stare!’ said the Earl. ‘I daresay you will stare more when I tell you why he comes!’

‘I should think it very likely that I should,’ she agreed, in a reflective tone. ‘For I cannot imagine what should bring him here, or, indeed, how he is to be entertained at this season.’

‘Never mind that! He is coming, Hester, to make you an offer!’

‘Oh, is he?’ she said vaguely, adding, after a thoughtful moment: ‘Does he want me to sell him one of Juno’s pups? I wonder he should not have told me so when we met in town the other day. It is not worth his while to journey all this distance – unless, of course, he desires first to see the pup.’

‘For God’s sake, girl –!’ exploded the Earl. ‘What the devil should Ludlow want with one of your wretched dogs?’

‘Indeed, it has me quite in a puzzle,’ she said, looking at him inquiringly.

‘Paperskull!’ said his lordship scathingly. ‘Damme if I know what he wants with you! He’s coming to offer for your *hand*!’

She sat staring at him, rather pale at first, and then flushing, and turning away her face. ‘Papa, pray –! If you are funning, it is not a kind jest!’

‘Of course I’m not funning!’ he answered. ‘Though it don’t surprise me you should think so. I don’t mind owning to you,

Hester, that when he broke it to me that it was my permission to address you that he was after I thought either he was foxed, or I was!’

‘Perhaps you were – both of you!’ she said, trying for a lighter note.

‘No, no! No such thing! But for him to be taking a fancy for you, when I daresay there are a dozen females trying to fix his interest, and everyone of ’em as well-born as you, besides being younger, and devilish handsome into the bargain – well, I never was nearer to being grassed in all my life!’

‘It isn’t true. Sir Gareth never had a fancy for me. Not even when I was young, and, I think, quite pretty,’ said Hester, with the ghost of a smile.

‘Oh, lord, no! Not *then!*’ said his lordship. ‘You were well-enough, but you couldn’t have expected him to look at you when the Lincombe chit was alive.’

‘No. He didn’t look at me,’ she agreed.

‘Well, well!’ the Earl said tolerantly. ‘She had ’em all beaten to flinders. By all accounts, he never cast so much as a glance at any other girl. And I’ve made up my mind to it that that’s why he’s offered for you.’ He saw that she was looking bewildered, and said with impatience: ‘Now, don’t be a pea-goose, girl! It’s as plain as a pikestaff that what Ludlow wants is a quiet, well-bred female who won’t have her head stuffed with romantic nonsense, or expect him to be thrown into a transport of passion. The more I think of it, the more it seems to me that he’s acting like a man of sense. If he’s still hankering after Clarissa Lincombe, it wouldn’t suit him at all to offer for some out-and-outer who would expect him to be dangling after her for ever, carried away by the violence of his feelings, or some such flummery. At the same time, it’s his duty to marry, and you may depend upon it he made up his mind to that when that brother of his got himself killed in Spain. Well, I don’t scruple to tell you that I never thought to see such a piece of good fortune befall you, Hester! To think that you should make a better match than any of your sisters, and at your age, too! It is beyond anything great!’

‘Beyond anything – oh, beyond *anything!*’ she said, in a queer voice. ‘And he is coming here, with your consent! Could you not have asked me first what *my* sentiments were? I do not wish for this splendid match, Papa.’

He looked as though he could hardly credit his ears. ‘Don’t wish for it?’ he repeated, in a stupefied tone. ‘You must be out of your senses!’

‘Perhaps I am.’ The ghostly smile that was at once nervous and mischievous again flitted across her face. ‘You should have warned Sir Gareth of it, sir. I am persuaded he cannot wish to marry an idiot.’

‘If,’ said his lordship awfully, ‘you fancy that that is a funny thing to say, let me tell you that it is not!’

‘No, Papa.’

He eyed her in uncertainty, feeling that in some strange way she was eluding him. She had always been an obedient, even a meek, daughter, but he had several times suffered from the uncomfortable suspicion that behind the cloud of gentle compliance there existed a woman who was quite unknown to him. He saw that it behoved him to tread warily, so he curbed his exasperation, and said, with a very fair assumption of paternal solicitude: ‘Now, what maggot has got into your head, my dear? You won’t tell me you don’t wish to be married, for every female must wish that!’

‘Yes, indeed!’ she sighed.

‘Can it be that you dislike Ludlow?’

‘No, Papa.’

‘Well, I was sure of *that!* I daresay there isn’t a better liked man in England, and as for you ladies –! The caps that have been set at him! You will be the envy of every unmarried woman in town!’

‘Do you think so indeed, Papa? How delightful that would be! But perhaps I might feel strange, and unlike myself. It wouldn’t be comfortable, not to be acquainted with myself.’

This baffling, and (he considered) very nonsensical observation, threw him out of his stride, but he persevered, saying with as much patience as he could command: ‘Well, never mind that!’

To be sure, I never thought he was trying to fix your interest, but I am sure I have seen him stand up with you at balls a hundred times! Ay, and sit talking to you, when one might have supposed that he would have been making up to one of the beauties that have been hanging out lures to him for ever!

‘He is very civil,’ she agreed. ‘He was used to talk to me of Clarissa, because I knew her too, and no one else would ever mention her name within his hearing.’

‘What, is he still doing so?’ exclaimed the Earl, feeling that here must be the clue to the mystery.

‘Oh, no!’ she replied. ‘Not for a long time now.’

‘Then why the devil, if he don’t want to talk of the Lincombe beauty, should he seek you out?’ he demanded. ‘Depend upon it, it has been to attach you!’

‘He does not precisely seek me out,’ she responded. ‘Only, if we meet at parties, he is too kind, and, I think, too great a gentleman, to pass me by with no more than a common bow.’ She paused, and sighed, blinking at her father. ‘How silly! I expect you are quite right, and he has had this notion of offering for me ever since Major Ludlow was killed.’

‘Of course I am right, and a fine compliment he is paying you!’

‘Oh, no!’ she said, and relapsed into silence, gazing thoughtfully before her.

He began to feel uneasy. It was impossible to read her countenance. It was mournful, yet tranquil; but in the tone of her voice there was an alarming note which recalled to his mind her contumacious behaviour when he had disclosed to her the only other offer he had ever received for her hand. He remembered how meekly she had borne every manifestation of his wrath, how dutifully she had begged his pardon for disobliging him. That had been five years ago, but here she was, still a spinster. After eyeing her for a moment or two, he said: ‘If you let this chance of achieving a respectable alliance slip, you are a bigger fool than I take you for, Hester!’

Her eyes came round to his face, a smile quivered for an

instant on her lips. 'No, how could that be, Papa?'

He decided to ignore this. 'You and he are both past the age of romantical high-flights,' he urged. 'He is a very agreeable fellow, and I don't doubt he'll make you a kind husband. Generous too! You will have enough pin-money to make your sisters stare, a position of consequence, and you will be mistress of a very pretty establishment. It is not as though your affections were engaged elsewhere: of course, if that were so, it would be another matter; but, as I told Ludlow, though I could not answer for your sentiments upon this occasion, I could assure him that you had formed no other attachment.'

'But that was not true, Papa,' she said. 'My affections were engaged many years ago.'

She said this so matter-of-factly that he thought he must have misunderstood her, and demanded a repetition of the remark. She very obligingly complied, and he exclaimed, quite thunder-struck: 'So I am to believe that you have been wearing the willow, am I? Fudge! It is the first I have ever heard of such a thing! Pray, who may this man be?'

She got up, drawing her shawl about her shoulders. 'It is of no consequence, Papa. He never thought of me, you see.'

With that, she drifted away in the indeterminate way which was peculiarly her own, leaving him baffled and furious.

He did not see her again until the family assembled for dinner; and by that time he had discussed the matter at such length with his son, his daughter-in-law, and his chaplain, and with such sublime disregard for the ears of his butler, two footmen, and his valet, all of whom at some time or another came within hearing, that there was hardly a soul in the house unaware that the Lady Hester had received, and meant to decline, a very flattering offer.

Lord Widmore, whose temper was rendered peevish by chronic dyspepsia, was quite as much vexed as his father; but his wife, a robust woman of alarmingly brusque manners, said, with the vulgarity for which she was famed: 'Oh, flimflam! Mere flourishing! I'd lay a monkey you crammed her, sir, for that's always your way. Leave it to me!'

‘She’s as obstinate as a mule!’ said Lord Widmore fretfully.

This made his lady laugh heartily, and beg him not to talk like a nodcock, for a more biddable female than his sister, she said, never existed.

It was perfectly true. Except in her ability to attract eligible suitors of herself, Hester was the sort of daughter with whom the most exacting parent might have been pleased. She always did as she was told, and never argued about it. She indulged neither in sulks nor in hysterics; and if she was unable to attract the right men, at least she had never been known to encourage the wrong ones. She was a good sister, too; and could always be relied upon to take charge of her young nephews and nieces in times of crisis; or to entertain, uncomplainingly, the dullest man invited (willy-nilly) to a dinner-party.

The first person to discuss Sir Gareth’s proposal with her was not Lady Widmore, but the Reverend Augustus Whyteleaf, the Earl’s chaplain, who seized the earliest opportunity that offered of conveying to her his own reflections upon the occasion.

‘You will not object, I know, to my adverting to the topic, painful though it must be to you,’ he stated. ‘His lordship, I should perhaps mention, did me the honour to admit me into his confidence, feeling, I collect, that a word from a man in my position might bear weight with you.’

‘Oh, dear! I am sure it ought to,’ said Hester, in a conscience-stricken tone.

‘But,’ said Mr Whyteleaf, squaring his shoulders. ‘I found myself obliged to inform his lordship that I could not take upon myself the office of Sir Gareth Ludlow’s advocate.’

‘How very brave of you!’ Hester said, sighing. ‘I am so glad, for I don’t at all wish to discuss it.’

‘It must indeed be repugnant to you. You will allow me, however, to tell you that I honour you for your decision, Lady Hester.’

She looked at him in mild surprise. ‘Good gracious, do you? I can’t think why you should.’

‘You have had the courage to spurn a match of mere worldly

brilliance. A match which, I daresay, would have been welcome to any lady less highminded than yourself. Let me venture to say that you have done just as you should: nothing but misery, I am persuaded, could result from an alliance between yourself and a fashionable fribble.’

‘Poor Sir Gareth! I fear you are right, Mr Whyteleafe: I should make him such an odiously dull wife, should I not?’

‘A man of his frivolous tastes might think so,’ he agreed. ‘To a man of more serious disposition, however – But on this head I must not, at present, say more.’

He then made her a bow, looking at her in a very speaking way, and withdrew, leaving her hovering between amusement and consternation.

Her sister-in-law, who had not failed to mark the exchange, from the other end of the Long Gallery, where the party had assembled after dinner, did not hesitate, later, to ask her what had been said. ‘For if he had the effrontery to speak to you about this offer your papa has received, I hope you gave him a sharp set-down, Hetty! Such presumption! But there! I don’t doubt your papa egged him on. I promise you I made no bones about telling him that capping hounds to a scent won’t do in this case.’

‘Thank you: that was kind. But Mr Whyteleafe didn’t try to persuade me. Indeed, he said that he had told my father he would not, which I thought very courageous in him.’

‘Ay, that was what made Lord Brancaster as sulky as a bear. I’ll tell you what, Hetty: you’ll do well to accept Ludlow’s offer before Widmore puts it into your father’s head that you mean to have a beggarly parson for your husband.’

‘But I don’t,’ said Hester.

‘Lord, I know *that!* But I have eyes in my head, and I can see that Whyteleafe is growing extremely particular in his attentions. The devil of it is that Widmore has seen it too, and you know what a slowtop he is, my dear! Your father’s another. I don’t doubt he said something to put you in a tweak.’

‘Oh, no!’ Hester said calmly.

‘At all events, he told you Ludlow was still moping for that girl

he was betrothed to the deuce knows how many years ago!’ said Lady Widmore bluntly. ‘If you take my advice, you won’t heed him! I never saw a man less in the dumps than Ludlow.’

‘No, indeed. Or a man less in love,’ remarked Hester.

‘What of it? I can tell you this, Hetty: it ain’t so often that persons of our station marry for love. Look at me! You can’t suppose I was ever in love with poor Widmore! But I never took, any more than you did, and when the match was proposed to me I agreed to it, because there’s nothing worse for a female than to be left on the shelf.’

‘One grows accustomed to it,’ Hester said. ‘Can you believe, Almeria, that Sir Gareth and I should – should suit?’

‘Lord, yes! Why not? If the chance had been offered to me, I should have jumped out of my skin to snatch it!’ responded Lady Widmore frankly. ‘I know you don’t love him, but what’s that to the purpose? You think it over carefully, Hetty! You ain’t likely to receive another offer, or, in any event, not such an advantageous one, though I daresay Whyteleafe will pop the question, as soon as he gets preferment. Take Ludlow, and you’ll have a handsome fortune, a position of the first consequence, and an agreeable husband into the bargain. Send him to the rightabout, and you’ll end your days an old maid, let alone be obliged to listen to your father’s and Widmore’s reproaches for ever, if *I* know anything of the matter!’

Hester smiled faintly. ‘One grows accustomed to that too. I have sometimes thought that when Papa dies I might live in quite a little house, by myself.’

‘Well, you won’t,’ said Lady Widmore trenchantly. ‘Your sister Susan will pounce on you: I can vouch for *that!* It would suit her very well to have you with her to wait on her hand and foot, and very likely act as governess to all those plain brats of hers as well! And Widmore would think it a first-rate scheme, so you’d get no support from him, or from Gertrude or Constance either. And it’s not a particle of good thinking you’d stand out against ’em, my dear, for you haven’t a ha’porth of spirit! If you want a home of your own, you’ll take Ludlow, and bless yourself for

your good fortune, for you won't get one by any other means!

With these encouraging words, Lady Widmore took herself off to her own bedchamber, pausing on the way to inform her lord that provided he and his father could keep still tongues in their heads she rather fancied she had done the trick.

The Lady Hester, once her maid was dismissed, the candles blown out, and the curtains drawn round her bed, buried her face in the pillow and cried herself quietly to sleep.

Three

Three days later, Sir Gareth, in happy ignorance of the wretched indecision into which his proposal had thrown his chosen bride, left London, and pursued a rather leisurely progress towards Cambridgeshire. He drove his own curricle, with a pair of remarkably fine match-bays harnessed to it, and broke the journey at the house of some friends, not many miles from Baldock, where he remained for two nights, resting his horses. He took with him his head groom, but not his valet: a circumstance which disgusted that extremely skilled gentleman more than it surprised him. Sir Gareth, who belonged to the Corinthian set, was always very well dressed, but he was quite capable of achieving the effect he desired without the ministrations of the genius who had charge of his wardrobe; and the thought that alien hands were pressing his coats, or applying inferior blacking to his Hessian boots, caused him to feel no anguish at all.

He was not expected at Brancaster Park until the late afternoon, but since the month was July, and the weather sultry, he set forward for the remainder of the journey in good time, driving his pair at an easy pace, and pausing to bait, when some twenty miles had been accomplished, in the village of Caxton. The place boasted only one posting-house, and that a modest one; and when Sir Gareth strolled into the coffee-room he found the landlord engaged in what appeared to be a somewhat heated argument with a young lady in a gown of sprig muslin, and a hat of chip-straw, which was tied becomingly over a mass of silken black locks.