



# One

The Sixth Earl of Saltash glanced round the immense dining-table, and was conscious of a glow of satisfaction. It was an emotion not shared by his butler, or by his steward, each of whom had served the Fifth Earl, and remembered, with a wealth of nostalgic detail, the various occasions upon which the State Dining-room had been used to entertain Royalty, foreign Ambassadors, and *ton* parties of great size and brilliance. The Fifth Earl had been a Public Man. It was otherwise with his son, who had neither the desire nor the ability to fill a great office. Indeed, so little expectation had he of entertaining even the most undistinguished scion of a royal house that the State Apartments at Easterby might have fallen into total disuse had he not, at the age of thirty, become betrothed to the Lady Charlotte Calne.

This, since he was the sole surviving son of the Fifth Earl, he could not but consider to be a matter of considerable family importance; and to mark it he had summoned to Easterby, to meet his prospective bride, every available member of the house of Staple. A rapid review of his maternal relations had been enough to convince him that their presence at this triumphant gathering would be as unnecessary as it was undesirable. To the Staples he was a person of consequence, the head of his family, and not even his masterful sister Albinia would withhold from him (in public) the respect to which his position entitled him. It was otherwise with the Timbercombes, owing him no allegiance; and it did not take him more than a

few reflective minutes to decide that his marriage did not concern them.

So twenty persons only sat down to dinner under the painted ceiling in the State Dining-room; and the Earl, seated at the head of a table loaded with plate, and bearing as a centrepiece an enormous epergne, presented by some foreign potentate to the Fifth Earl, looked around him with satisfaction.

It mattered nothing to him that the room was over-large for the company, and that the gentlemen outnumbered the ladies by two: the Staples had responded in the most gratifying way to his invitation, and were behaving – even his formidable Aunt Caroline – just as they ought. He could see that Lady Melksham, his future mother-in-law, was impressed. With most of the Staples she was already acquainted, but she had not until today met his Uncle Trevor, the Archdeacon, who was seated beside her, or his huge cousin John. His unmarried aunt, Maria, who kept house for him, had suffered a little qualm about John's lowlier position at the dining-table, but she had yielded to the Earl's wish. She knew, of course, that an Archdeacon must take precedence over a retired Captain of Dragoon Guards, but the Archdeacon was her younger brother, and it was difficult for her to realize that he had any particular standing in the world. John, on the other hand, was the only son of her second brother, and heir-presumptive to the Earldom, which made him, in her eyes, a person of consequence. She ventured to say as much to the Earl, and he was not displeased: he felt it to be a very just observation.

'However, I daresay dear John won't care where he sits!' had added Lady Maria comfortably.

The Earl felt that this was regrettably true. He was very fond of John, but he thought him far too careless of his dignity. Probably his years of campaigning in the Peninsula had made him forgetful of what was due to himself and the name he bore. His manners were easy to a fault, and he very often behaved in a freakish way which seriously shocked his noble relative. His exploits in the Peninsula had made him a by-word amongst his

fellow-officers; and one at least of his actions since he had sold out, in 1814, had seemed to the Earl unbecomingly whimsical. No sooner did he learn that Napoleon was again at large than he returned to the Army as a volunteer; and when the Earl had shown him that duty did not demand such a sacrifice of his dignity, he had burst out laughing, and had exclaimed: 'Oh, Bevis, Bevis —! You don't suppose I'd miss this campaign, do you? I wouldn't, for a fortune! Duty be hanged!'

So off had gone John to the wars again. But he had not remained for long in the humble position of a volunteer. Colonel Clifton, commanding the 1st Regiment of Dragoons, no sooner heard that Crazy Jack was back than he enrolled him as an extra aide-de-camp. He emerged from the Waterloo Campaign much refreshed, and with no more serious injuries than a sabre-cut, and a graze from a spent ball. The Earl was very glad to see him safe home again, and began to think that it was time he settled down, and married an eligible female. He had inherited a small estate from his father; he was twenty-nine years of age; and he had no brothers.

His lordship, glancing round his table, remembered this, as his eyes alighted on his aunt-in-law, the Honourable Mrs Staple. He wondered that she should not have provided her son with a suitable wife, and thought that perhaps he would broach the matter to her later in the evening. He was not quite two years older than John, but as the head of the family he believed himself to be responsible for his cousins. This helped him to overcome the feeling of inferiority which too often possessed him when he was confronted by these over-poweringly large persons. A big race, the Staples: he was himself a tall man, but narrow-shouldered, and inclined to stoop. John, of course, was a giant; and his sister, Lady Lichfield, who was talking with determined amiability to the Earl's very dull brother-in-law, Mr Tackenhams, stood five foot nine inches in her bare feet. Lucius Staple, only child of the Fourth Earl's third son, was a big man, too; and so was Arthur, the Archdeacon's eldest-born, just now striving to entertain his cousin Lettice, who was making sheep's eyes at

John, across the table. Even young Geoffrey Yatton, Lettice's brother, though still slightly gangling, bade fair to tower above the Earl; and their mother, Lady Caroline, could only be described as massive.

Lady Charlotte Calne, the Earl's betrothed, had been so much struck by the splendid proportions of the Staples that she had been moved to utter a spontaneous remark. 'How very big your cousins are!' she said. 'They are all very good-looking: exceptionally so, I fancy.'

He was gratified, and said eagerly: 'Do you think so indeed? But Lucius has red hair, you know, and although Geoffrey is well enough, I don't consider Arthur above the ordinary. But John is a fine fellow, isn't he? I hope you will like him: everyone likes John! I have a great regard for him myself.'

'If that is so he must have a claim on *my* regard. I assure you I shall like him excessively,' replied the lady, as one who knew where her duty lay.

Not for the first time he congratulated himself on his choice of bride. Himself a man of no more than mild sensibility he found nothing amiss with his Charlotte's colourless manner; and he would have experienced considerable surprise had he known that she did not meet with universal approbation in his family. But although Lady Maria thought she would make Bevis an excellent wife, the Archdeacon that she was a pretty-behaved girl, and Lady Caroline that her only fault was a lack of dowry, it was noticeable that Mrs Staple refrained from expressing an opinion, and Mr Yatton (though not within his wife's hearing) went so far as to say that she favoured her mother too much for his taste.

The younger generation was more forthright, only the Earl's sister, who had been instrumental in promoting the match, according Lady Charlotte a full measure of approval. Miss Yatton, with all the assurance of a young lady with one successful London Season at her back, pronounced her to be a dowdy; her brother Geoffrey confided to his cousin Arthur that he would as lief, himself, take a cold poultice to wife; and Captain Staple,

unaware of Lady Charlotte's amiable determination to like him, answered the quizzical lift of Lucius's sandy brows with an expressive grimace.

They were standing together at one end of the Crimson State Saloon after dinner. Lucius chuckled, and said: 'Oh, she'll suit Bevis well enough!'

'I hope she may. She wouldn't suit me!' said the Captain. He glanced round the ornate room. 'This is a horrid party!' he decided. 'What the devil made Saltash dish up all his relations? Enough to make the girl cry off! Lord, here's my uncle bearing down on us! I wish I hadn't been fool enough to come!'

'Well, my dear boy!' said the Archdeacon, in mellifluous accents, and laying an affectionate hand on one of the Captain's great shoulders. 'And how is it with you? I need not ask, however: you are in a capital way! A happy event this, is it not?'

'Yes, if Bevis thinks so,' replied the Captain.

The Archdeacon thought it best to ignore the implication of this. He said: 'A young female of the first consequence! But come, now! When, you great creature, are we to be celebrating *your* approaching nuptials?'

'Not yet, sir: I'm not in the petticoat-line. And if ever I do become engaged,' he added, his blue gaze wandering thoughtfully round the room, 'I wouldn't celebrate the event in this fashion, by Jupiter!'

'Well!' remarked Lucius, as their uncle, with a sweet, mechanical smile, moved away, 'you do know how to repulse the enemy, don't you, Jack?'

'I didn't mean to. Do you think he was offended?' Captain Staple broke off, his eyes widening in suspicion and dismay. 'Good God, Lucius, just look at that!' he ejaculated.

Lucius, following the direction of his horrified gaze, saw that a footman had entered the Saloon, tenderly bearing a gilded harp. Lady Charlotte was being solicited to display her chief accomplishment, while her mama informed Mrs Staple, with complacency, that her voice had been trained by the first masters. While Lord Saltash, eagerly, and the elder ladies of the

party, politely, begged Charlotte to overcome her diffidence, Lord Melksham, the lady's brother, edged his way across the Saloon, and suggested to Lucius that they should (as he phrased it) nabble Ralph Tackenhams, and withdraw, with Captain Staple, from the Saloon for a quiet rubber of whist.

'Ay, willingly!' responded Lucius. 'But you'll find his wife won't permit him to go with us, if I know my cousin Albinia!'

'Nabble him when she ain't looking,' said Lord Melksham hopefully. 'Very partial to a quiet rubber, Ralph!'

'No, it can't be done.' Captain Staple spoke with decision. 'We must – shall! – stay, and listen to your sister's performance.'

'But she'll sing for ever!' objected his lordship. 'Dismal stuff, too: assure you!'

But Captain Staple, with a shake of his head, moved away towards the group gathered about the fair harpist, and, obedient to an inviting smile, sat down on a small sofa beside his cousin Lettice.

'This will be *dreadful*!' Miss Yatton whispered.

'Yes, very likely,' he agreed. He turned his head to look down at her, a smile in his eyes. 'You've grown very fine since I saw you last, Letty. I suppose you've come out, have you?'

'Good gracious, yes! At the beginning of the Season! If you had been in London, you would know that I enjoyed a *considerable* success!' said Miss Yatton, never one to hide her light under a bushel. 'Only fancy! Papa received three offers for my hand! Quite ineligible, of course, but just think of it! *Three*, and in my first Season!'

He was amused, but he checked her, Lady Charlotte having by this time disposed herself at the harp. He covered one of his lively young cousin's hands with his own large one, and gave it an admonishing squeeze. Miss Yatton, who was bidding fair to become an accomplished flirt, obeyed the unspoken command, but cast up at him so roguish a look that his sister, observing it, and the smile with which it was received, took instant fright, and determined at the earliest opportunity to draw her mother's attention to a danger she had perhaps not perceived.

But Mrs Staple, visited by her daughter some two hours later, listened to her warning with unshaken placidity, merely saying: ‘Dear me, did you get me to send my maid away only to tell me this, Fanny?’

‘Mama, she ogled him throughout dinner! And the way in which he took her hand, and smiled at her – ! I assure you –’

‘I observed the whole, my love, and was most forcibly put in mind of the way he has with his puppies.’

‘Puppies?’ exclaimed Lady Lichfield. ‘Letty is not a puppy, Mama! Indeed, I think her an arrant flirt, and I cannot but be uneasy. You will own that she would not *do* for my brother!’

‘Do not put yourself in a taking, my love!’ replied Mrs Staple, tying the strings of her nightcap under her chin. ‘I only hope she may amuse him enough to keep him here over the weekend, though I don’t scruple to say that I very much doubt it. My dear Fanny, was there ever such an insipid affair?’

‘Oh, there was never anything like it!’ readily agreed her daughter. ‘But, Mama, how shocking a thing it would be if John were to fall in love with Letty Yatton!’

‘I have no apprehension of it,’ replied Mrs Staple calmly.

‘He seemed to be quite taken with her,’ said Fanny. ‘I cannot but wonder, ma’am, if Letty’s vivacity may not make dear Elizabeth’s *gentler* manners seem to him – well, *tame!*’

‘You are making a piece of work about nothing,’ said Mrs Staple. ‘If he should feel a partiality for Elizabeth I shall be excessively happy. But I hope I am not such a goose as to set my heart upon the match. Depend upon it, your brother is very well capable of choosing a wife for himself.’

‘Mama! How can you be so provoking?’ exclaimed Fanny. ‘When we have both of us been at such pains to bring John and Elizabeth together, and you have actually invited Elizabeth to Mildenhurst next week!’

‘Very true,’ returned Mrs Staple imperturbably. ‘I should not think it wonderful if John were to find Eliza’s quiet good sense welcome after three days spent – if the chit can contrive it! – in Letty’s company.’



Fanny looked a little dubious, but she was prevented from making any rejoinder by a knock on the door. Mrs Staple called to this late visitor to come in, adding, in an under-voice: 'Take care! This is John: I know his knock.'

So, indeed, it proved. Captain Staple entered, saying: 'May I come in, Mama? Hallo, Fan! Talking secrets?'

'Good gracious, no! Unless you think it a secret that this is the most insipid party that ever was given!'

'Well, that's just it,' said John confidentially. 'If you don't object, Mama, I think I shall be off in the morning.'

'Not remain until Monday!' cried Fanny. 'You can't cry off like that!'

'I'm not crying off. I was invited to meet the bride, and I have met her.'

'But you can't tell Bevis you don't mean to stay!'

'As a matter of fact, I have told him,' said John, a little guiltily. 'Told him I had arranged to visit friends – not having understood that I was expected to remain here above a night. Now, there's no need to pull that face, Fan! If you're thinking Bevis was offended, you're quite out.'

'Very well, my dear,' interposed his mother, before Fanny could speak. 'Do you mean to go home? For I must tell you that although I should like nothing better than to bring *my* visit to an end tomorrow I cannot do it without putting your Aunt Maria into a miff.'

'No, no, I don't mean to drag you off with me, Mama!' he assured her. 'To tell you the truth, I thought I might take a trip into Leicestershire, to see Wilfred Babbacombe. Bound to be there, now cubbing has started.' He read condemnation in his sister's eye, and added hastily: 'It seems a pity I shouldn't do so, now that I'm in the district.'

'In the district! Easterby must be sixty miles from Leicester, and very likely more!'

'Well, now that I'm in the north,' amended the Captain.

'But you will not let Mama return to Mildenhurst without an escort!'

‘No, of course I won’t. My man shall go with her. You won’t object to having Cocking to ride beside the chaise in my stead, will you, Mama? You’ll be quite safe with him.’

‘By all means, my dear. But had you not better take him with you?’

‘Lord, no! I’ll take what I want in a saddle-bag, and shan’t have the least need of him.’

‘When,’ demanded Fanny, a look of foreboding in her eyes, ‘do you mean to return to Mildenhurst?’

‘Oh, I don’t know!’ said her maddening brother. ‘In a week or so, I daresay. Why?’

Fanny, prohibited by a quelling glance from her mama from answering this question, merely looked her disapprobation. Mrs Staple said: ‘It is not of the smallest consequence. I have friends coming to stay at Mildenhurst next week, so you are not to be thinking that I may be lonely, John.’

‘Oh, that’s famous, then!’ he said, relieved. ‘You know, Mama, I don’t know how it is – whether it’s my uncle, with his bamboozling ways, or Aunt Caroline, or Lucius’s laugh, or Ralph Tackenham prosing on for ever, or young Geoffrey aping the dandy-set, or just the devilish propriety of Easterby – but I can’t stand it here!’

‘I know just what you mean,’ his mother assured him.

He bent, giving her a hug and a kiss. ‘You are the best mother in the world!’ he said. ‘What’s more, that’s a very fetching nightcap, ma’am! I must go: Melksham wants to start a faro-bank now, and Bevis don’t like it above half. Poor old fellow! he’ll never be able to handle Melksham – not when Melksham’s muddled, which he is, six days out of the seven. Christened with pump-water, that lad! He’ll be as drunk as an artillery-man before morning.’

With this ominous prophecy, the Captain then took himself off, leaving his parent unperturbed, and his sister seething. Hardly had the door closed behind him, than she exclaimed: ‘I think John is the most vexatious creature alive! How could you let him go, Mama? You know what he is! I daresay you won’t set

eyes on him again for a month! And now he won't even meet Elizabeth!

'It is unfortunate, but I don't despair,' replied Mrs Staple, smiling faintly. 'As for letting him go, a man of nine-and-twenty, my love, is not to be held in leading-strings. Moreover, had I *obliged* him to come home to meet Elizabeth I am persuaded he would have taken her in aversion from the outset.'

'Well,' said Fanny crossly, 'I think he is odiously provoking, ma'am!'

'Very true, my dear: all men are odiously provoking,' agreed Mrs Staple. 'Now I am going to bed, and you had best do the same.'

'Yes, or Lichfield will wonder what has become of me,' Fanny said, getting up from her chair.

'Not at all,' responded her mother coolly. 'Lichfield, dear child, is no less provoking than any other man, and is at this moment – I have no doubt – playing faro downstairs.'

Fanny acknowledged the probable truth of this pronouncement by bidding her parent a dignified good night.

## Two

Captain Staple was not destined to leave Easterby at an early hour on the following morning. Thanks to the nocturnal habits of Lord Melksham, it was daylight before he went to bed. That amiable but erratic peer, dissuaded from opening a faro-bank, had challenged the company to a quiet game of loo; and since the elders of the party, who included besides the Archdeacon, his brother-in-law, Mr Yatton, and Mr Merridge the Earl's chaplain, had retired soon after the ladies, and the Earl was plainly unable to keep the situation within bounds, Captain Staple had not the heart to desert him. The Earl was grateful, but he would not permit him to break up the party, which he was perfectly willing to do. He said: 'No, no! If Melksham is determined – He is my guest, you know, and, besides – Well, you will understand how it is!'

'No, I don't,' said John bluntly. 'And if I were you, old fellow, I would order things as I liked in my own house!'

No one, after as much as one glance at the Captain's good-humoured but determined countenance, could doubt this. The Earl said fretfully: 'Yes, but you don't understand! It's all very well for you – However, that don't signify! The thing is, you know what Lucius is, and that stupid brother-in-law of mine! And here's my Uncle Yatton taken himself off, and left young Geoffrey to do as he pleases! I wish you will stay, and help me to see that they keep the line!'

So Captain Staple, no gamester, stayed; and if he failed to keep the stakes as low as his noble cousin would have wished he

did contrive to prevent the quiet game of loo from becoming an extremely noisy game of loo. By the time Lord Melksham had wearied of this sport, and inaugurated a game of brag, young Mr Yatton had succumbed to his potations, which, as the Captain cheerfully informed the Earl, was a very happy circumstance, since it cut his losses short. Having carried Geoffrey up to bed, he presently held his own brother-in-law's head under the pump in the scullery, guided his cousin Arthur's wavering steps up the stairs, and gently but firmly convinced Lord Melksham that it would be better to retire to bed than to try the power of a hunting-horn discovered in the Great Hall.

After so strenuous a night it was not surprising that the Captain should have slept far into the morning. He did not leave Easterby until past noon, and had he attended to the representations made to him by his host and his sister he would not have left it at all that day. It was pointed out to him that the sky threatened bad weather, that he could not hope to achieve more than a few miles of his journey, and that he would do well to abandon the whole project of riding to Leicestershire. But the probability of rain did not much trouble any man who was accustomed to bivouacking under the worst of conditions in the Peninsula and the Pyrenees; and the possibility of having to rack up for the night at some wayside inn seemed to him infinitely preferable to another of Lord Melksham's convivial evenings. So at noon, Cocking, the private servant who had been with him through all his campaigns, brought his big, Roman-nosed bay horse up to the house, and strapped to the saddle a heavy frieze cloak, and the bag which contained all that the Captain considered to be necessary for his journey. The rest of the Captain's luggage consisted of a couple of portmanteaux, and these he instructed Cocking to despatch by carrier to Edenhope, Mr Babbacombe's hunting-box in Leicestershire. The sight of two such modest pieces caused Lord Melksham's man, a very superior person, to wonder that any gentleman should care to travel about the country so meagrely provided for. His own

master, he said, never stirred from home without several trunks, a dressing-case, and himself: a highly talented valet. However, the bubble of his conceit was swiftly pricked, Cocking replying without hesitation that there was nothing for him to hold his nose up at in that. 'If the Captain was a tallow-faced twiddle-poop, mounted on a pair o' cat-sticks, I dessay he'd need a snirp like you to pad his calves out, and finify him,' he said. 'Only he ain't! Would there be anything more you was wishful to say about the Captain?'

Lord Melksham's man prudently decided that there was nothing more he wished to say, explaining this forbearance later to his colleagues as being due to his reluctance to bandy words with a vulgar make-bait. Cocking, left in possession of the field, carefully loaded the Captain's pistols, placed them in the saddleholsters, and led the bay up to the house. The Captain, attired in buckskin breeches and top-boots, and a coat of slightly military cut, gave him a few last instructions, and mounted the big horse. Keeping a hand on the bridle, Cocking looked up at him, and asked if he was to join him at Edenhope, when he had escorted the mistress safely home.

'No, you might not find me there. Besides, I shan't need you.'

'Well, sir, that's as maybe, but what I *should* like to know is who's going to clean them leathers?' demanded his henchman.

'I don't know. Mr Babbacombe's man, I daresay.'

'Ho!' said Cocking. 'That'll put Mr Babbacombe's man in prime twig, that will! Howsever, it's just as you wish, sir, out of course!'

He then watched his master ride off down the avenue, slowly shaking his head. A sparrow, hopping about within a few yards of him, was the recipient of his next cryptic confidence. 'Resty, very resty!' he said, staring very hard at the bird. 'If you was to ask me, I should say we shall have him up to some kind of bobbery in just a brace o' snaps!'

The Captain, although he had not the smallest intention of getting up to bobbery, was heartily glad to escape from Easterby. There was nothing but Lord Melksham's mild excesses to break

the tedium; and he did not find these amusing. His cousin's life was hedged about by all the proprieties which had driven the Captain, eight years earlier, to persuade his father to buy him a pair of colours. He had had a strong notion that the Army in time of war would suit him, and events had proved him to be right. Life in the Peninsula had been uncertain, uncomfortable, and often haphazard, but it had offered almost every kind of adventure, and John had refused none of these. He had enjoyed himself enormously, and never so intensely as when engaged upon some dangerous enterprise. But when the war ended, in 1814, although he rejoiced as much as any man in the downfall of Bonaparte, he knew that the life he liked had ended too. Not for John Staple, the boredom of military life in peace-time! He yielded at last to his mother's solicitations, and sold out. She thought that he would find plenty to occupy him in the management of his estate, his father having died a year previously. The elder John Staple had been an indolent man, and for some months his son was busy enough. Then had come the news of Bonaparte's escape from Elba, and a brief period of exciting activity for John. But Bonaparte had been a prisoner on St Helena for two years now, and everyone seemed to feel that it was time John settled down to a life of civilian respectability. He felt it himself, and tried to be content, but every now and then a fit of restlessness would seize him. When that happened his subsequent actions would be unpredictable, though, as his brother-in-law gloomily said, it was safe to assume that they would be freakish, and possibly outrageous. Lord Lichfield had every reason to believe that he had once wandered for a couple of weeks with a party of gypsies; and not readily would he forget John's sudden arrival at his house in Lincolnshire, at midnight, by way of an open window, and clad in strange and disreputable garments. 'Good God, what have you been doing?' he had exclaimed.

'Free trading!' had replied John, grinning at him. 'I'm glad I've found you at home: I want a bath, and some clean clothes.'

Lord Lichfield had been too much shocked to do more than

goggle at him for a full minute. It wasn't, of course, as bad as John made it sound: the whole affair had been the result of an accident. 'But what I say is this, Fanny!' had complained his lordship later. 'If I go sailing, and run into a squall, and have to swim for it, do I get picked up by a smuggling-vessel? Of course I don't! No one but John would be! What's more, no one but John would finish the voyage with a set of cut-throat rascals, or help them to land their kegs! And if it *had* happened to me, I shouldn't be alive to tell the tale: they'd have knocked me on the head, and dropped me overboard.'

'I cannot conceive how it comes about that he was spared!' Fanny had said. 'Oh, I *wish* he would not do such things!'

'Yes,' agreed her lord. 'Though, mind you, he's very well able to take care of himself.'

'But in the power of a whole crew of smugglers!'

'I expect they liked him.'

'*Liked* him?'

'Well, you can't help liking him!' pointed out his lordship. 'He's a very charming fellow – and I wish to God he'd settle down, and stop kicking up these larks!'

'Mama is right!' declared Fanny. 'We must find him an eligible wife!'

Candidate after candidate for this post did Fanny and her mama find, and cunningly throw in John's way. Apparently he liked them – all of them. This one was a most conversible girl, that one seemed to him a very lively girl, another a remarkably pretty girl. But he asked none of them to marry him. When his sister ventured to ask him once if he had ever been in love, he had replied quite seriously, Yes: he rather thought he had been desperately in love with the lodge-keeper's wife, who used to regale him with brandy-snaps, and allowed him to keep in a hutch outside her kitchen-door the ferrets Mama had so much disliked. Was that *all?* had demanded an exasperated sister. No, there had been a girl in Lisbon, when he first joined. Juanita, or was it Conchita? He couldn't remember, but at all events she was the loveliest creature you ever saw. Dark, of course, and with the



biggest eyes, and *such* a well-turned ankle! Had he been in love with her? ‘Lord, yes!’ replied John. ‘We all were!’

He admitted that it was time he was thinking of getting married: not, of course, to Fanny, but to Mama. ‘Well, I know, Mama,’ he said apologetically. ‘But the thing is I’ve got no fancy for one of these dashed *suitable* marriages, where you don’t really care a fig for the girl, or she for you. I don’t mean to offer marriage to any girl who don’t give me a leveller. So I daresay I shall remain a bachelor, for they don’t – any of ’em! And if one *did*,’ he added thoughtfully, ‘it’s Lombard Street to a China orange you wouldn’t take to her!’

‘Dearest boy, I should take to any girl whom you loved!’ declared Mrs Staple.

He grinned his appreciation of this mendacity, and gave her shoulders a hug, saying: ‘That was a whisker!’

She boxed his ears. ‘Odious boy! The fact of the matter is that it is a thousand pities we are not living in archaic times. What *you* would have liked, my son, is to have rescued some female from a dragon, or an ogre!’

‘Famous good sport to have had a turn-up with a dragon,’ he agreed. ‘As long as you didn’t find yourself with the girl left on your hands afterwards, which I’ve a strong notion those fellows did.’

‘Such girls,’ his mother reminded him, ‘were always very beautiful.’

‘To be sure they were! Dead bores too, depend upon it! In fact, I shouldn’t be at all surprised if the dragons were very glad to be rid of ’em,’ said John.

Not very promising, this. But Fanny had discovered Elizabeth Kelfield, and Mrs Staple had acknowledged, after careful and critical study of Miss Kelfield, that here was a lady who might well take John’s fancy. She was dark; she was decidedly handsome; her fortune was respectable; and although she was not quite twenty years of age she seemed older, the circumstance of her having taken from an invalid mother’s shoulders the burden of household cares having given her an assurance

beyond her years. Mrs Staple thought she had quality, and began to cultivate the ailing Mrs Kelfield.

And now, when mother and daughter had been coaxed to Mildenhurst, off went John into Leicestershire, so that all the scheming so painstakingly undertaken on his behalf seemed likely to be wasted.

In happy ignorance of this, Captain Staple, climbing the slopes of the Pennines, found himself in a wild, moorland country, and liked it. Having a good sense of direction, he had left the pike road at the earliest opportunity, and with it, in a very short space of time, all signs of civilization. This exactly suited his mood, and he rode over the moors, at an easy pace and in a south-easterly direction. He had meant originally to have spent the night in Derby, but his late start made this impossible. Chesterfield became his objective. That was before the bay cast a shoe. When this happened, the Captain had ample time in which to regret having left the pike road, for he appeared to be in the centre of a vast desert. The only habitations to be seen for miles were an occasional cottage, and a few rough sheds dotted about the moors for the protection of shepherds. It was dusk when the Captain, leading Beau, dropped off the moor into a small village, which boasted not only a forge, but an alehouse as well. The smith had gone home, and by the time he had been fetched from his cottage, and the fire had been blown up again, not only had the last of the daylight vanished, but the rain, which had held off all day, had begun to fall. There was no possibility of racking up for the night at the alehouse, but bait was forthcoming for man and beast. Captain Staple ate a hearty meal of ham and eggs, lit one of his Spanish cigarillos, and went out to see what hope there might be of the weather's clearing. There was plainly none. The rain was falling with persistent steadiness, and not a star was to be seen. The Captain resigned himself to a wet ride, and sought counsel of the landlord. This was his undoing. The worthy man not only knew of a comfortable inn a few miles distant, but, anxious to be helpful, directed the Captain to it by what he assured him was the shortest route. He said that

the Captain could not miss it, and no doubt the Captain would not have missed it if the landlord had not omitted to tell him that when he bade him take the first lane on the right he did not mean the track which, as every native of those parts knew, led winding upwards to the moor, and ended at a small farmstead. It was an hour later when the Captain, trusting his instinct, and riding steadily southward, found a lane which, rough though it was, seemed likely to lead to some village, or pike road. He followed this, noting with satisfaction that it ran slightly downhill, and within a short space of time knew that his guess had been correct. The lane ran into a broader road, which crossed it at right angles. Captain Staple had no very certain idea where he was, but he was reasonably sure that Sheffield lay to the east, probably at no great distance, so he turned left-handed into the larger road. The rain dripped from the brim of his hat, and mud generously splashed his top-boots, but the heavy frieze cloak had so far kept him fairly dry. He leaned forward to pat Beau's streaming neck, saying encouragingly: 'Not much farther now, old chap!'

A bend in the road brought into view an encouraging sight. A small light glowed ahead, which, from its position, the Captain judged to be the lantern hung upon a toll-gate. 'Come, now, Beau!' he said, in heartening accents. 'We're on the right track, at all events! If this is a pike road, it must lead to *some* town!'

He rode on, and soon saw that he had indeed reached a pike. The light, though very dim, enabled him to see that it was shut, and guarded, on the northern side of the road, by a gatehouse. No light was visible in the house, and the door was shut. 'Cross-country road, not much used,' the Captain informed Beau. He raised his voice, shouting imperatively: 'Gate!'

Nothing happened. 'Do I dismount, and open it for myself?' enquired the Captain. 'No, I'll be damned if I do! *Gate*, I say! Gate! Turn out, there, and be quick about it!'

The door in the centre of the gatehouse opened a little way, and a feeble glimmer of lantern light was cast across the road. 'Well, come along!' said the Captain impatiently. 'Open up, man!'

After a moment's hesitation, this summons was obeyed. The gatekeeper came out into the road, and revealed himself, in the light of the lantern he carried, to be of diminutive stature. The Captain, looking down at him in some surprise, as he stood fumbling with the gate-tickets, discovered him to be a skinny urchin, certainly not more than thirteen years old, and probably less. The lantern's glow revealed a scared young face, freckled, and slightly tear-stained. He said: 'Hallo, what's this? Are you the gatekeeper?'

'N-no, sir. Me dad is,' responded the youth, with a gulp.

'Well, where is your dad?'

Another gulp. 'I dunno.' A ticket was held up. 'Frippence, please, your honour, an' it opens the next two gates.'

But the Captain's besetting sin, a strong predilection for exploring the unusual, had taken possession of him. He disregarded the ticket, and said: 'Did your dad leave you to mind the gate for him?'

'Yessir,' acknowledged the youth, with a somewhat watery sniff. 'Please, sir, it's frippence, and —'

'Opens the next two gates,' supplied the Captain. 'What's your name?'

'Ben,' replied the youth.

'Where does this road lead to? Sheffield?'

After consideration, Ben said that it did.

'How far?' asked the Captain.

'I dunno. Ten miles, I dessay. Please, sir —'

'As much as that! The devil!'

'It might be twelve, p'raps. I dunno. But the ticket's frippence, please, sir.'

The Captain looked down into the not very prepossessing countenance raised anxiously to his. The boy looked frightened and overwatched. He said: 'When did your dad go off?' He waited, and added, after a moment: 'Don't be afraid! I shan't hurt you. Have you been minding the gate for long?'

'Yes — no! Dad went off yesterday. He said he'd be back, but he ain't, and please, sir, don't go telling no one, else Dad'll give

me a proper melting!’ begged the youth, on a note of urgent entreaty.

The Captain’s curiosity was now thoroughly roused. Gatekeepers might have their faults, but they did not commonly leave their posts unattended except by small boys for twenty-four hours at a stretch. Moreover, Ben was badly scared; and to judge by the furtive glances he cast round he was scared by something besides the darkness and his loneliness.

The Captain swung himself to the ground, and pulled the bridle over Beau’s head. ‘Seems to me I’d better stay and keep you company for the night,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Now, where am I going to stable my horse?’

Ben was so much astonished that he could only stand staring up at the Captain with his mouth open and his eyes popping. The Captain knew that the generality of country gatehouses had small gardens attached to them with, often enough, rough sheds erected for the storage of hoes, swap-hooks, and wood. ‘Have you got a shed?’ he demanded.

‘Ay,’ uttered Ben, still gazing, fascinated, at this enormous and fantastic traveller.

‘What’s in it?’

‘Cackling-cheats.’

The Captain recognized the language. His troop had contained several of the rogues of whom his Grace of Wellington, in querulous humour, had more than once asserted that his gallant army was for the most part composed. ‘Hens?’ he said. ‘Oh, well, no matter! Take me to it! Is it big enough for my horse?’

‘Ay,’ said Ben doubtfully.

‘Lead the way, then!’

Apparently Ben felt that it would be unwise to demur, which he seemed much inclined to do, for after giving another gulp he picked up his lantern, and guided the Captain to a wicket-gate behind the toll-house.

The shed proved to be surprisingly large; and when the lantern was hung up on a protruding nail its light revealed not only a collection of fowls, perched on a roost, but also some

straw, and a truss of hay in one corner. There were unmistakable signs that Beau was not the first horse to be stabled there, a circumstance which John found interesting, but which he thought it wisest not to comment upon. Ben was regarding him with a mixture of awe and suspicion, so he smiled down at the boy, and said: 'You needn't be afraid: I shan't hurt you. Now, my cloak's too wet to put over Beau here: have you got a blanket to spare?'

'Ay. But if Mr Chirk was to come – But I dessay he won't!' said Ben. 'Coo, he is a big prancer!'

He then took the saddle-bag which John had unstrapped, and went off with it. When he returned it was with a pail of water, and a horse-blanket. He found that the Captain, having shed his coat, was rubbing Beau down, and he at once collected a wisp of straw, and set to work on the big horse's legs. He seemed to have decided that his uninvited guest, though alarmingly large, really did mean him no harm, for he looked much more cheerful, and volunteered the information that he had set the kettle on to boil. 'There's some rum left,' he said.

'There won't be presently,' replied John, watching the boy's fearless handling of his horse. The mild jest was well-received, a friendly grin being cast up at him. He said casually: 'Do you work in a stable?'

'Some days I does. Others it's all sorts,' replied Ben. 'Mr Sopworthy hires me mostly.'

'Who is he?'

'Buffer, at Crowford. Blue Boar,' said Ben, beginning to wipe the stirrups with a piece of sacking.

'Innkeeper?'

'Ay.'

'Does your dad keep a horse?'

The wary look came back into Ben's face. 'No.' He eyed John sideways. 'That horse-cloth ain't me dad's. It – it belongs to a friend. He comes here sometimes. Maybe he wouldn't like you using of it, so – so you don't want to go saying anything about it, please, sir! Nor about him, acos – acos he don't like meeting no strangers!'

‘Shy, is he? I won’t say anything,’ promised John, wondering if this were perhaps the man of whom Ben was afraid. He was by this time convinced that some mystery hung about the toll-house, with which, no doubt, the disappearance of its custodian was connected; but he was wise enough to keep this reflection to himself, since it was plain that Ben, in the manner of a colt, was uncertain of him, ready to shy off in a panic.

When Beau had been covered with the blanket, and left to lip over an armful of hay, Ben led the Captain up the garden to the back of the toll-house, where a central door opened into a small kitchen. The house, as John quickly saw, was of the usual pattern. It consisted of two tolerable rooms with another between them, which had been divided into two by a wooden partition. The rear half was the kitchen, and the front the toll-office. The kitchen was small, over-warm, and extremely untidy. Since it was lit by a couple of dip-candles in tin holders, an unpleasant aroma of hot tallow hung about it. But the Captain knew from past experiences in the more primitive parts of Portugal that the human nose could rapidly accustom itself to even worse smells, and he entered the room without misgiving. Ben shut and bolted the door, set down the lantern, and produced from the cupboard a black bottle, and a thick tumbler. ‘I’ll mix you a bumper,’ he offered.

The Captain, who had seated himself in the Windsor chair by the fire, grinned, but said: ‘Much obliged to you, but I think I’ll mix it myself. If you want to make yourself useful, see if you can pull off these boots of mine!’

This operation, which took time, and all Ben’s strength, did much to break the ice. It seemed to Ben exquisitely humorous that he should tumble nearly heels over head, clasp a muddied top-boot to his chest. He began to giggle, forgetting his awe, and looked all at once much younger than John had at first supposed him to be. He disclosed, upon enquiry, that he was going on for eleven.

Having found a pair of pumps in his saddle-bag, John mixed himself a glass of hot rum and water, and sat down again with his

legs stretched out before him, and his boots standing beside the hearth to dry. 'That's better,' he said, leaning his fair head against the high-back of the chair, and smiling sleepily across at his host. 'Tell me, are we likely to be called out very often to open that gate?'

Ben shook his head. 'No one don't come this way after dark much,' he said. 'Sides, it's raining fit to bust itself.'

'Good!' said John. 'Where am I going to sleep?'

'You could have me dad's bed,' suggested Ben doubtfully.

'Thank you, I will. Where do you think your dad may have gone to?'

'I dunno,' said Ben simply.

'Does he often go away like this?'

'No. He never done it afore – not like this. And he ain't gone on the mop, because he ain't no fuddlecap, not me dad. And if he don't come back, they'll put me on the Parish.'

'I expect he'll come back,' said John soothingly. 'Have you got any other relations? Brothers? Uncles?'

'I got a brother. Leastways, unless he's been drownded, I have. He was pressed. I shouldn't wonder if I was never to see him no more.'

'Lord, yes, of course you will!'

'Well, I don't want to,' said Ben frankly. 'He's a proper jobbernoll, that's what he is. Else they wouldn't never have snabbed him. Me dad says so.'

If Ben possessed other relatives, he did not know of them. His mother seemed to have died some years before; and it soon became apparent that he clung to his father less from affection than from a lively dread of being thrown on the Parish. He was convinced that if this should befall him he would be sent to work at one of the foundries in Sheffield. He lived near enough to Sheffield to know what miseries were endured by the swarms of stunted children who were employed from the age of seven in the big manufacturing towns; and it was not surprising that this fate should seem so terrible to him. There was only one worse fate known to him, and this, before long, he was to confide to John.



While he talked, and John sat sipping his rum, the wind had risen a little, bringing with it other sounds than the steady dripping of the rain. The wicket-gate for the use of travellers on foot creaked and banged gently once or twice, and when this happened Ben's face seemed to sharpen, and he broke off what he was saying to listen intently. John noticed that his eyes wandered continually towards the back-door, and that the noises coming from the rear of the house seemed to worry him more than the creak of the gate. A gust of wind blew something over with a clatter. It sounded to John as though a broom, or a rake, had fallen, but it brought Ben to his feet in a flash, and drove him instinctively to John's side.

'What is it?' John said quietly.

'*Him!*' breathed Ben, his gaze riveted to the door.

John got up, and trod over to the door, ignoring a whimper of protest. He shot back the bolts, and opened it, stepping out into the garden. 'There's no one here,' he said, over his shoulder. 'You left a broom propped against the wall, and the wind blew it over, that's all. Come and see for yourself!' He waited for a moment, and then repeated, on a note of authority: 'Come!'

Ben approached reluctantly.

'Weather's fairing up,' remarked John, leaning his shoulders against the door-frame, and looking up at the sky. 'Getting lighter. We shall have a fine day tomorrow. Well? Can you see anyone?'

'N-no,' Ben acknowledged, with a little shiver. He looked up at John, and added hopefully: 'He couldn't get me, could he? Not with a big cove like you here.'

'Of course not. No one could get you,' John replied, shutting the door again, and going back to the fire. 'You may bolt it if you choose, but there's no need.'

'Yes, 'cos he might come to see me dad, and I mustn't see him, nor him me,' explained Ben.

'Lord, is he as shy as all that? What's the matter with him? Is he so ugly?'

'I dunno. I never seen him. Only his shadder – onct!'