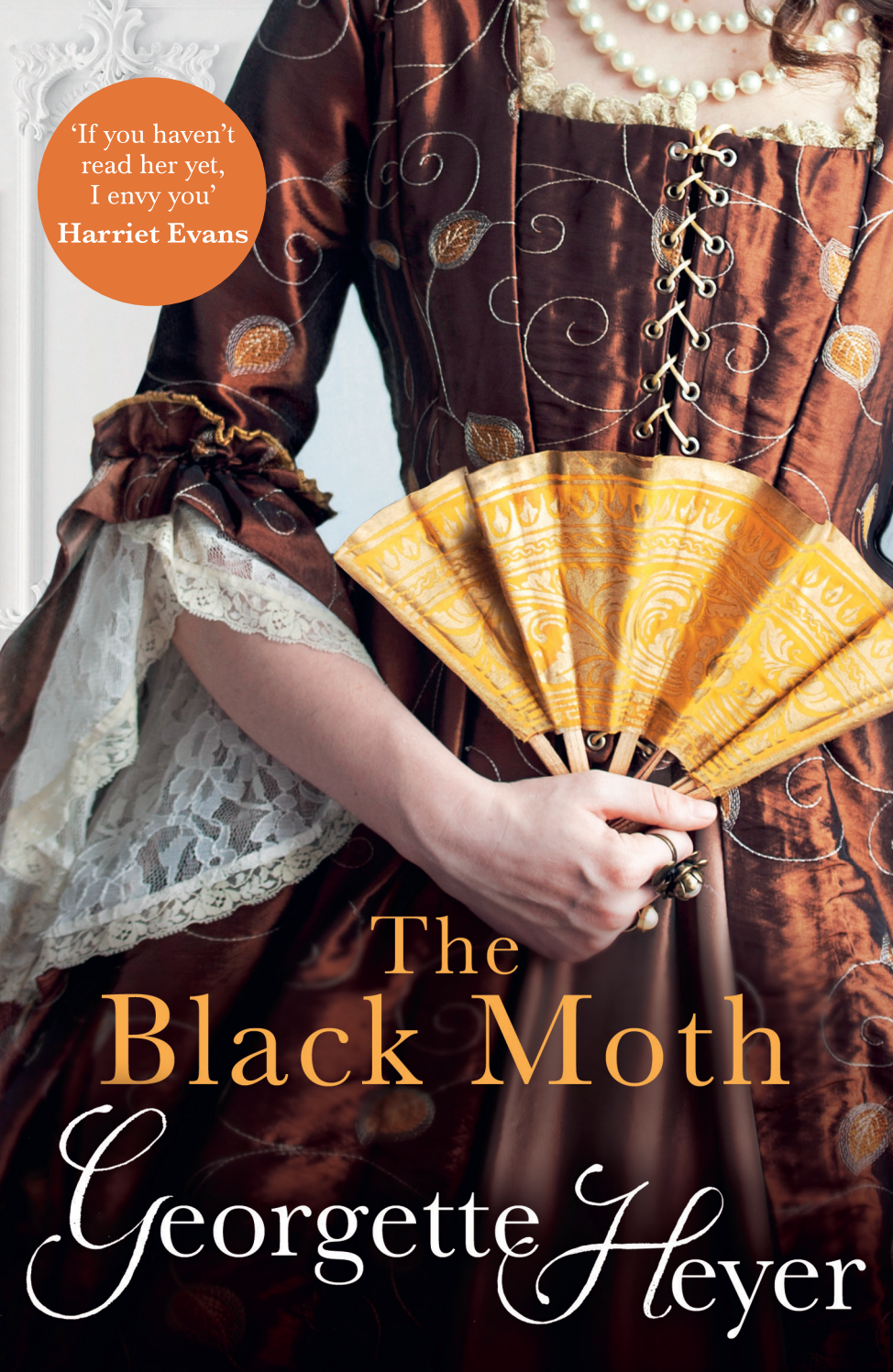

'If you haven't read her yet, I envy you'
Harriet Evans
The
Black Moth
Georgette Heyer

The Black Moth

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

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Wassily Kandinsky
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To G. B. H.

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The Black Moth

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Prologue

Clad in his customary black and silver, with raven hair unpowdered and elaborately dressed, diamonds on his fingers and in his cravat, Hugh Tracy Clare Belmanoir, Duke of Andover, sat at the escritoire in the library of his town house, writing.

He wore no rouge on his face, the almost unnatural pallor of which seemed designedly enhanced by a patch set beneath his right eye. Brows and lashes were black, the former slanting slightly up at the corners, but his narrow, heavy-lidded eyes were green and strangely piercing. The thin lips curled a little, sneering, as one dead-white hand travelled to and fro across the paper.

> '. . . but it seems that the Fair Lady has a Brother, who, finding Me Enamoured, threw down the Gauntlet. I soundly whipt the presumptuous Child, and so the Affair ends. Now, as you, My dear Frank, also took some Interestt in the Lady, I write for the Express Purpose of informing You that at my Hands she has received no Hurt, nor is not like to. That I in part tell You and You shall not imagine Yr self in Honor bound again to call Me out, which Purpose, an I mistake not, I yesterday read in Yr Eyes. I should be Exceeding loth to meet You in a Second Time, when I should consider it my Duty to teach You an even severer Lesson than Before. This I am not Wishful of doing for the Liking I bear You.

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'So in all Friendship believe me, Frank,
'Your most Obedient, Humble
'DEVIL.'

His Grace of Andover paused, pen held in mid-air. A mocking smile dawned in his eyes, and he wrote again.

'In the event of any Desire on Yr Part to hazard Yr Luck with my late Paramour, Permit Me to warn You 'gainst the Bantam Brother, who is in Very Truth a Fire-Eater, and would wish to make of You, as of Me, one Mouthfull. I shall hope to see You at the Queensberry Rout on Thursday, when You may Once More strive to direct mine Erring Footsteps on to the Thorny Path of Virtue.'

His Grace read the postscript through with another satisfied, sardonic smile. Then he folded the letter, and affixing a wafer, peremptorily struck the hand-bell at his side.

And the Honourable Frank Fortescue, reading the postscript half-an-hour later, smiled too, but differently. Also he sighed and put the letter into the fire.

'And so ends another *affaire*. . . . I wonder if you'll go insolently to the very end?' he said softly, watching the paper shrivel and flare up. 'I would to God you might fall honestly in love – and that the lady might save you from yourself – my poor Devil!'

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One

At The Chequers Inn, Fallowfield

Chadber was the name of the host, florid of countenance, portly of person, and of manner pompous and urbane. Solely within the walls of the Chequers lay his world, that inn having been acquired by his great-grandfather as far back as the year 1667, when the jovial Stuart King sat on the English throne, and the Hanoverian Electors were not yet dreamed of.

A Tory was Mr Chadber to the backbone. None so bitter 'gainst the little German as he, and surely none had looked forward more eagerly to the advent of the gallant Charles Edward. If he confined his patriotism to drinking success to Prince Charlie's campaign, who shall blame him? And if, when sundry Whig gentlemen halted at the Chequers on their way to the coast, and, calling for a bottle of Rhenish, bade him toss down a glass himself with a health to his Majesty, again who shall blame Mr Chadber for obeying? What was a health one way or another when you had rendered active service to two of his Stuart Highness's adherents?

It was Mr Chadber's boast uttered only to his admiring Tory neighbours, that he had, at the risk of his own life, given shelter to two fugitives of the disastrous 'Forty-five, who had come so far out of their way as quiet Fallowfield. That no one had set eyes on either of the men was no reason for doubting an honest

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landlord's word. But no one would have thought of doubting any statement that Mr Chadber might make. Mine host of the Chequers was a great personage in the town, being able both to read and to write, and having once, when young, travelled as far north as London town, staying there for ten days and setting eyes on no less a person than the great Duke of Marlborough himself when that gentleman was riding along the Strand on his way to St James's.

Also, it was a not-to-be-ignored fact that Mr Chadber's home-brewed ale was far superior to that sold by the landlord of the rival inn at the other end of the village.

Altogether he was a most important character, and no one was more aware of his importance than his worthy self.

To 'gentlemen born', whom, he protested, he could distinguish at a glance, he was almost obsequiously polite, but on clerks and underlings, and men who bore no signs of affluence about their persons, he wasted none of his deference.

Thus it was that, when a little green-clad lawyer alighted one day from the mail coach and entered the coffee-room at the Chequers, he was received with pomposity and scarce-veiled condescension.

He was nervous, it seemed, and more than a little worried. He offended Mr Chadber at the outset, when he insinuated that he was come to meet a gentleman who might perhaps be rather shabbily clothed, rather short of purse, and even of rather unsavoury repute. Very severely did Mr Chadber give him to understand that guests of that description were entirely unknown at the Chequers.

There was an air of mystery about the lawyer, and it appeared almost as though he were striving to prove mine host. Mr Chadber bridled, a little, and became aloof and haughty.

When the lawyer dared openly to ask if he had had any dealings with highwaymen of late, he was properly and thoroughly affronted.

The lawyer became suddenly more at ease. He eyed Mr Chadber speculatively, holding a pinch of snuff to one thin nostril.

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'Perhaps you have staying here a certain – ah – Sir – Anthony – Ferndale?' he hazarded.

The gentle air of injury fell from Mr Chadber. Certainly he had, and come only yesterday a-purpose to meet his solicitor.

The lawyer nodded.

'I am he. Be as good as to apprise Sir Anthony of my arrival.'

Mr Chadber bowed exceeding low, and implored the lawyer not to remain in the draughty coffee-room. Sir Anthony would never forgive him an he allowed his solicitor to await him there. Would he not come to Sir Anthony's private parlour?

The very faintest of smiles creased the lawyer's thin face as he walked along the passage in Mr Chadber's wake.

He was ushered into a low-ceilinged, pleasant chamber looking out on to the quiet street, and left alone what time Mr Chadber went in search of Sir Anthony.

The room was panelled and ceilinged in oak, with blue curtains to the windows and blue cushions on the high-backed settle by the fire. A table stood in the centre of the floor, with a white table-cloth thereon and places laid for two. Another smaller table stood by the fireplace, together with a chair and a stool.

The lawyer took silent stock of his surroundings, and reflected grimly on the landlord's sudden change of front. It would appear that Sir Anthony was a gentleman of some standing at the Chequers.

Yet the little man was plainly unhappy, and fell to pacing to and fro, his chin sunk low on his breast, and his hands clasped behind his back. He was come to seek the disgraced son of an Earl, and he was afraid of what he might find.

Six years ago Lord John Carstares, eldest son of the Earl of Wyncham, had gone with his brother, the Hon Richard to a card party, and had returned a dishonoured man.

That Jack Carstares should cheat was incredible, ridiculous, and at first no one had believed the tale that so quickly spread. But he had confirmed that tale himself, defiantly and without shame, before riding off, bound, men said, for France and the

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foreign parts. Brother Richard was left, so said the countryside, to marry the lady they were both in love with. Nothing further had been heard of Lord John, and the outraged Earl forbade his name to be mentioned at Wyncham, swearing to disinherit the prodigal. Richard espoused the fair Lady Lavinia and brought her to live at the great house, strangely forlorn now without Lord John's magnetic presence; but, far from being an elated bridegroom, he seemed to have brought gloom with him from the honeymoon, so silent and so unhappy was he.

Six years drifted slowly by without bringing any news of Lord John, and then, two months ago, journeying from London to Wyncham, Richard's coach had been waylaid, and by a highwayman who proved to be none other than the scapegrace peer.

Richard's feelings may be imagined. Lord John had been singularly unimpressed by anything beyond the humour of the situation. That, however, had struck him most forcibly, and he had burst out into a fit of laughter that had brought a lump into Richard's throat, and a fresh ache to his heart.

Upon pressure John had given his brother the address of the inn, 'in case of accidents', and told him to ask for 'Sir Anthony Ferndale' if ever he should need him. Then with one hearty handshake, he had galloped off into the darkness . . .

The lawyer stopped his restless pacing to listen. Down the passage was coming the tap-tap of high heels on the wooden floor, accompanied by a slight rustle as of stiff silks.

The little man tugged suddenly at his cravat. Supposing – supposing debonair Lord John was no longer debonair? Supposing – he dared not suppose anything. Nervously he drew a roll of parchment from his pocket and stood fingering it.

A firm hand was laid on the door-handle, turning it cleanly round. The door opened to admit a veritable apparition, and was closed again with a snap.

The lawyer found himself gazing at a slight, rather tall gentleman who swept him a profound bow, gracefully flourishing his smart three-cornered hat with one hand and delicately clasping

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cane and perfumed handkerchief with the other. He was dressed in the height of the Versailles fashion, with full-skirted coat of palest lilac laced with silver, small-clothes and stockings of white, and waistcoat of flowered satin. On his feet he wore shoes with high red heels and silver buckles, while a wig of the latest mode, marvellously powdered and curled and smacking greatly of Paris, adorned his shapely head. In the foaming lace of his cravat reposed a diamond pin, and on the slim hand, half covered by drooping laces, glowed and flashed a huge emerald.

The lawyer stared and stared again, and it was not until a pair of deep blue, rather wistful eyes met his in a quizzical glance, that he found his tongue. Then a look of astonishment came into his face, and he took a half step forward.

'Master Jack!' he gasped. 'Master – *Jack*!'

The elegant gentleman came forward and held up a reproving hand. The patch at the corner of his mouth quivered, and the blue eyes danced.

'I perceive that you are not acquainted with me, Mr Warburton,' he said, amusement in his pleasant, slightly drawling voice. 'Allow me to present myself: Sir Anthony Ferndale, à *vous servir*!'

A gleam of humour appeared in the lawyer's own eyes as he clasped the outstretched hand.

'I think you are perhaps not acquainted with yourself, my lord,' he remarked drily.

Lord John laid his hat and cane on the small table, and looked faintly intrigued.

'What's your meaning, Mr Warburton?'

'I am come, my lord, to inform you that the Earl, your father, died a month since.'

The blue eyes widened, grew of a sudden hard, and narrowed again.

'Is that really so? Well, well! Apoplexy, I make no doubt?'

The lawyer's lips twitched uncontrollably.

'No, Master Jack; my lord died of heart failure.'

'Say you so? Dear me! But will you not be seated, sir? In a

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moment my servant will have induced the *chef* to serve dinner. You will honour me, I trust?'

The lawyer murmured his thanks and sat down on the settle, watching the other with puzzled eyes.

The Earl drew up a chair for himself and stretched his foot to the fire.

'Six years, eh? I protest 'tis prodigious good to see your face again, Mr Warburton . . . And I'm the Earl? Earl and High Toby, by Gad!' He laughed softly.

'I have here the documents, my lord . . .'

Carstares eyed the roll through his quizzing glass.

'I perceive them. Pray return them to your pocket, Mr Warburton.'

'But there are certain legal formalities, my lord –'

'Exactly. Pray do not let us mention them!'

'But, sir!'

Then the Earl smiled, and his smile was singularly sweet and winning.

'At least, not until after dinner, Warburton! Instead, you shall tell me how you found me?'

'Mr Richard directed me where to come, sir.'

'Ah, of course! I had forgot that I told him my – *pied-à-terre* when I waylaid him.'

The lawyer nearly shuddered at this cheerful, barefaced mention of his lordship's disreputable profession.

'Er – indeed, sir. Mr Richard is eager for you to return.'

The handsome young face clouded over. My lord shook his head.

'Impossible, my dear Warburton. I am convinced Dick never voiced so foolish a suggestion. Come now, confess! 'tis your own fabrication?'

Warburton ignored the bantering tone and spoke very deliberately.

'At all events, my lord, I believe him anxious to make – amends.'

Carstares shot an alert, suspicious glance at him.

'Ah!'

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'Yes, sir. Amends.'

My lord studied his emerald with half-closed eyelids.

'But why – amends, Warburton?' he asked.

'Is not that the word, sir?'

'I confess it strikes me as inapt. Doubtless I am dull of comprehension.'

'You were not wont to be, my lord.'

'No? But six years changes a man, Warburton. Pray, is Mr Carstares well?'

'I believe so, sir,' replied the lawyer, frowning at the deft change of subject.

'And Lady Lavinia?'

'Ay.' Mr Warburton looked searchingly across at him, seeing which, my lord's eyes danced afresh, brim full with mischief.

'I am delighted to hear it. Pray present my compliments to Mr Carstares and beg him to use Wyncham as he wills.'

'Sir! Master Jack! I implore you!' burst from the lawyer, and he sprang up, moving excitedly away, his hands twitching, his face haggard.

My lord stiffened in his chair. He watched the other's jerky movements anxiously, but his voice when he spoke was even and cold.

'Well, sir?'

Mr Warburton wheeled and came back to the fireplace, looking hungrily down at my lord's impassive countenance. With an effort he seemed to control himself.

'Master Jack, I had better tell you what you have already guessed. I know.'

Up went one haughty eyebrow.

'You know what, Mr Warburton?'

'That you are innocent!'

'Of what, Mr Warburton?'

'Of cheating at cards, sir!'

My lord relaxed, and flicked a speck of dust from his great cuff.

'I regret the necessity of having to disillusion you, Mr Warburton.'

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'My lord, do not fence with me, I beg! You can trust me, surely.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Then do not keep up this pretence with me; no, nor look so hard neither! I've watched you grow up right from the cradle, and Master Dick too, and I know you both through and through. I *know* you never cheated at Colonel Dare's nor anywhere else! I could have sworn it at the time – ay, when I saw Master Dick's face, I knew at once that he it was who had played foul, and you had but taken the blame!'

'No!'

'I know better! Can you, Master Jack, look me in the face and truthfully deny what I have said? Can you? Can you?'

My lord sat silent.

With a sigh, Warburton sank on to the settle once more. He was flushed, and his eyes shone, but he spoke calmly again.

'Of course you cannot. I have never known you lie. You need not fear I shall betray you. I kept silence all these years for my lord's sake, and I will not speak until you give me leave.'

'Which I never shall.'

'Master Jack, think better of it, I beg of you! Now that my lord is dead –'

'It makes no difference.'

'No difference? 'Twas not for his sake? 'Twas not because you knew how he loved Master Dick?'

'No.'

'Then 'tis Lady Lavinia –'

'No.'

'But –'

My lord smiled sadly.

'Ah, Warburton! And you averred you knew us through and through! For whose sake should it be but his own?'

'I feared it!' The lawyer made a hopeless gesture with his hands. 'You will not come back?'

'No, Warburton, I will not; Dick can manage my estates. I remain on the road.'

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Warburton made one last effort.

'My lord!' he cried despairingly. 'Will you not at least think of the disgrace to the name an you be caught?'

The shadows vanished from my lord's eyes.

'Mr Warburton, I protest you are of a morbid turn of mind! Do you know, I had not thought of so unpleasant a contingency? I swear I was not born to be hanged!'

The lawyer would have said more, had not the entrance of a servant carrying a loaded tray, put an end to all private conversation. The man placed dishes upon the table, lighted candles, and arranged two chairs.

'Dinner is served, sir,' he said.

My lord nodded and made a slight gesture toward the windows. Instantly the man went over to them and drew the heavy curtains across.

My lord turned to Mr Warburton.

'What say you, sir? Shall it be burgundy or claret, or do you prefer sack?'

Warburton decided in favour of claret.

'Claret, Jim,' ordered Carstares, and rose to his feet.

'I trust the drive has whetted your appetite, Warburton, for honest Chadber will be monstrous hurt an you do not justice to his capons.'

'I shall endeavour to spare his feelings,' replied the lawyer with a twinkle, and seated himself at the table.

Whatever might be Mr Chadber's failings, he possessed an excellent cook. Mr Warburton dined very well, beginning on a fat duck, and continuing through the many courses that constituted the meal.

When the table was cleared, the servant gone, and the port before them, he endeavoured to guide the conversation back into the previous channels. But he reckoned without my lord, and presently found himself discussing the Pretender's late rebellion. He sat up suddenly.

'There were rumours that you were with the Prince, sir.'

Carstares set down his glass in genuine amazement.

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'I?'

'Indeed, yes. I do not know whence the rumour came, but it reached Wyncham. My lord said nought, but I think Mr Richard hardly credited it.'

'I should hope not! Why should they think me turned rebel, pray?'

Mr Warburton frowned.

'Rebel, sir?'

'Rebel, Mr Warburton. I have served under his Majesty.'

'The Carstares were ever Tories, Master Jack, true to their rightful king.'

'My dear Warburton, I owe nought to the Stuart princes. I was born in King George the First's reign, and I protest I am a good Whig.'

Warburton shook his head disapprovingly.

'There has never been a Whig in the Wyncham family, sir.'

'And you hope there never will be again, eh? What of Dick? Is he faithful to the Pretender?'

'I think Mr Richard does not interest himself in politics, sir.'

Carstares raised his eyebrows, and there fell a silence.

After a minute or two Mr Warburton cleared his throat.

'I – I suppose, sir – you have no idea of – er – discontinuing your – er – profession?'

My lord gave an irrepressible little laugh.

'Faith, Mr Warburton, I've only just begun!'

'Only – But a year ago, Mr Richard –'

'I held him up? Aye, but to tell the truth, sir, I've not done much since then!'

'Then, sir, you are not – er – notorious?'

'Good gad, no! Notorious, forsooth! Confess, Warburton, you thought me some heroic figure? "Gentleman Harry", perhaps?'

Warburton blushed.

'Well, sir – I – er – wondered.'

'I shall have to disappoint you, I perceive. I doubt Bow Street has never heard of me – and – to tell the truth – 'tis not an occupation which appeals vastly to my senses.'

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'Then why, my lord, do you continue?'

'I must have some excuse for roaming the country,' pleaded Jack. 'I could not be idle.'

'You are not – compelled to – er – rob, my lord?'

Carstares wrinkled his brow inquiringly.

'Compelled? Ah – I take your meaning. No, Warburton, I have enough for my wants – now; time was – but that is past. I rob for amusement's sake.'

Warburton looked steadily across at him.

'I am surprised, my lord, that you, a Carstares, should find it – amusing.'

John was silent for a moment, and when he at length spoke it was defiantly and with a bitterness most unusual in him.

'The world, Mr Warburton, has not treated me so kindly that I should feel any qualms of conscience. But, an it gives you any satisfaction to know it, I will tell you that my robberies are few and far between. You spoke a little while ago of my probable – ah – fate – on Tynburn Tree. I think you need not fear to hear of that.'

'I – It gives me great satisfaction, my lord, I confess,' stammered the lawyer, and found nothing more to say. After a long pause he again produced the bulky roll of parchment and laid it down before the Earl with the apologetic murmur of:

'Business, my lord!'

Carstares descended from the clouds and eyed the packet with evident distaste. He proceeded to fill his and his companion's glass very leisurely. That done, he heaved a lugubrious sigh, caught Mr Warburton's eye, laughed in answer to its quizzical gleam, and broke the seal.

'Since you *will* have it, sir – business!'

Mr Warburton stayed the night at the Chequers and travelled back to Wyncham next day by the two o'clock coach. He played piquet and écarté with my lord all the evening, and then retired to bed, not having found an opportunity to argue his mission as he had hoped to do. Whenever he had tried to turn the

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conversation that way he had been gently but firmly led into safer channels, and somehow had found it impossible to get back. My lord was the gayest and most charming of companions, but talk 'business' he would not. He regaled the lawyer with spicy anecdotes and tales of abroad, but never once allowed Mr Warburton to speak of his home or of his brother.

The lawyer retired to rest in a measure reassured by the other's good spirits, but at the same time dispirited by his failure to induce Carstares to return to Wyncham.

Next morning, although he was not up until twelve, he was before my lord, who only appeared in time for lunch, which was served as before in the oak parlour.

He entered the room in his usual leisurely yet decided fashion and made Mr Warburton a marvellous leg. Then he bore him off to inspect his mare, Jenny, of whom he was inordinately proud. By the time they returned to the parlour luncheon was served, and Mr Warburton realised that he had scarcely any time left in which to plead his cause.

My lord's servant hovered continually about the room, waiting on them, until his master bade him go to attend to the lawyer's valise. When the door had closed on his retreating form, Carstares leaned back in his chair, and, with a rather dreary little smile, turned to his companion.

'You want to reason with me, I know, Mr Warburton, and, indeed, I will listen an I must. But I would so much rather that you left the subject alone, believe me.'

Warburton sensed the finality in his voice, and wisely threw away his last chance.

'I understand 'tis painful, my lord, and I will say no more. Only remember – and think on it, I beg!'

The concern in his face touched my lord.

'You are too good to me, Mr Warburton, I vow. I can only say that I appreciate your kindness – and your forbearance. And I trust that you will forgive my seeming churlishness and believe that I am indeed grateful to you.'

'I wish I might do more for you, Master Jack!' stammered

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Warburton, made miserable by the wistful note in his favourite's voice. There was no time for more; the coach already awaited him, and his valise had been hoisted up. As they stood together in the porch, he could only grip my lord's hand tightly and say good-bye. Then he got hurriedly into the coach, and the door was slammed behind him.

My lord made his leg, and watched the heavy vehicle move forward and roll away down the street. Then with a stifled sigh he turned and walked towards the stables. His servant saw him coming and went at once to meet him.

'The mare, sir?'

'As you say, Jim – the mare. In an hour.'

He turned and would have strolled back.

'Sir – your honour!'

He paused, looking over his shoulder.

'Well?'

'They're on the look-out, sir. Best be careful.'

'They always are, Jim. But thanks.'

'Ye – ye wouldn't take me with ye, sir?' pleadingly.

'Take you? Faith, no! I've no mind to lead you into danger. And you serve me best by remaining to carry out my orders.'

The man fell back.

'Ay, sir; but – but –'

'There are none, Jim.'

'No, sir – but ye *will* have a care?'

'I will be the most cautious of men.' He walked away on the word, and passed into the house.

In an hour he was a very different being. Gone was the emerald ring, the foppish cane; the languid air, too, had disappeared, leaving him brisk and businesslike. He was dressed for riding, with buff coat and buckskin breeches, and shining top boots. A sober brown wig replaced the powdered creation, and a black tricorne was set rakishly atop.

He stood in the deserted porch, watching Jim strap his baggage to the saddle, occasionally giving a curt direction. Presently Mr Chadber appeared with the stirrup-cup, which he drained and

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handed back with a word of thanks and a guinea at the bottom.

Someone called lustily from within, and the landlord, bowing very low, murmured apologies and vanished.

Jim cast a glance at the saddle-girths, and, leaving the mare quietly standing in the road, came up to his master with gloves and whip.

Carstares took them silently and fell to tapping his boot, his eyes thoughtfully on the man's face.

'You will hire a coach, as usual,' he said at length, 'and take my baggage to –' (He paused, frowning) – 'Lewes. You will engage a room at the White Hart and order dinner. I shall wear – apricot and – h'm!'

'Blue, sir?' ventured Jim, with an idea of being helpful.

His master's eyes crinkled at the corners.

'You are a humorist, Salter. Apricot and cream. Cream? Yes, 'tis a pleasing thought – cream. That is all – Jenny!'

The mare turned her head, whinnying as he came towards her.

'Good lass!' He mounted lightly and patted her glossy neck. Then he leaned sideways in the saddle to speak again to Salter, who stood beside him, one hand on the briddle.

'The cloak?'

'Behind you, sir.'

'My wig?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Pistols?'

'Ready primed, sir.'

'Good. I shall be in Lewes in time for dinner – with luck.'

'Yes, sir. Ye – ye will have a care?' anxiously.

'Have I not told you?' He straightened in the saddle, touched the mare with his heel, and bestowing a quick smile and a nod on his man, trotted easily away.

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Two

My Lord at the White Hart

Sir Anthony Ferndale sat before the dressing-table in his room at the White Hart, idly polishing his nails. A gorgeous silk dressing gown lay over the back of his chair, and, behind him, Jim was attending to his wig, at the same time hovering anxiously over the coat and waistcoat that were waiting to be donned.

Carstares left off polishing his nails, yawned, and leaned back in his chair, a slim graceful figure in cambric shirt and apricot satin breeches. He studied his cravat for some moments in the mirror, and lifted a hand to it. Salter held his breath. With extreme deliberation the hand moved a diamond and emerald pin the fraction of an inch to one side, and fell to his side again. Salter drew a relieved breath, which brought his master's eyes round to himself.

'No trouble, Jim?'

'None at all, sir.'

'Neither had I. 'Twas most surprisingly easy. The birds had no more fight in them than sparrows. Two men in a coach – one a bullying rascal of a merchant, the other his clerk. Gad! but I was sorry for that little man!' He paused, his hand on the rouge pot.

Salter looked an inquiry.

'Yes,' nodded Carstares. 'Very sorry. The fat man would

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appear to bully and browbeat him after the manner of his kind; he even blamed him for my advent, the greasy coward! Yes, Jim, you are right – he did not appeal to me, ce M. Fudby. So –' ingenuously, 'I relieved him of his cash-box and two hundred guineas. A present for the poor of Lewes.'

Jim jerked his shoulder, frowning.

'If ye give away all ye get, sir, why do ye rob at all?' he asked bluntly.

His whimsical little smile played about my lord's mouth.

''Tis an object for my life, Jim; a noble object. And I believe it amuses me to play Robin Hood – take from the rich to give to the poor,' he added, for Salter's benefit. 'But to return to my victims – you would have laughed had you but seen my little man come tumbling out of the coach when I opened the door!'

'Tumble, sir? Why should he do that?'

'He was at pains to explain the reason. It seems he had been commanded to hold the door to prevent my entering – so when I jerked it open, sooner than loose his hold, he fell out on to the road. Of course, I apologised most abjectly – and we had some conversation. Quite a nice little man . . . It made me laugh to see him sprawling on the road, though!'

'Wish I could have seen it, your honour. I would ha' liked fine to ha' been beside ye.' He looked down at the lithe form with some pride. 'I'd give something to see ye hold up a coach, sir!'

Haresfoot in hand, Jack met his admiring eyes in the glass, and laughed.

'I make no doubt you would . . . I have cultivated a superb voice, a trifle thick and beery, a little loud, perhaps – ah, something to dream of o' nights! I doubt they do, too,' he added reflectively, and affixed the patch at the corner of his mouth.

'So? A little low, you think? But 'twill suffice – What's toward?'

Down below in the street there was a great stirring and bustling: horses' hoofs, shouts from the ostlers, and the sound of wheels on the cobble-stones. Jim went to the window and looked down, craning his neck to see over the balcony.

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''Tis a coach arrived, sir.'

'That much had I gathered,' replied my lord, busy with the powder.

'Yes, sir. O lord, sir!' He was shaken with laughter.

'What now?'

''Tis the curiosest sight, sir! Two gentlemen, one fat and t'other small! One's all shrivelled-looking, like a spider, while t'other –'

'Resembles a hippopotamus – particularly in the face?'

'Well yes, sir. He do rather. And he be wearing purple.'

'Heavens, yes! Purple, and an orange waistcoat!'

Jim peered afresh.

'So it is, sir! But how did you know?' Even as he put the question, understanding flashed into Jim's eyes.

'I rather think that I have had the honour of meeting these gentlemen,' replied my lord placidly. 'My buckle, Jim . . . Is't a prodigious great coach with wheels picked out in yellow?'

'Ay, your honour. The gentlemen seem a bit put out, too.'

'That is quite probable. Does the smaller gentleman wear somewhat – ah – muddied garments?'

'I can't see, sir, he stands behind the fat gentleman.'

'Mr Bumble Bee . . . Jim!'

'Sir!' Jim turned quickly at the sound of the sharp voice.

He found that my lord had risen, and was holding up a waistcoat of pea-green pattern on a bilious yellow ground, between a disgusted finger and thumb. Before his severe frown Jim dropped his eyes and stood looking for all the world like a schoolboy detected in some crime.

'You put this – this monstrosity – out for *me* to wear?' in awful tones.

Jim eyed the waistcoat gloomily and nodded.

'Yes, sir.'

'Did I not specify cream ground?'

'Yes, sir. I thought – I thought that 'twas cream!'

'My good friend, it is – it is – I cannot say what it is. And pea-green!' he shuddered. 'Remove it.'

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Jim hurried forward and disposed of the offending garment.

'And bring me the broidered satin. Yes, that is it. It is particularly pleasing to the eye.'

'Yes, sir,' agreed the abashed Jim.

'You are excused this time,' added my lord, with a twinkle in his eye. 'What are our two friends doing?'

Salter went to the window.

'They've gone in to the house, sir. No, here's the spider gentleman! He do seem in a hurry, your honour!'

'Ah!' murmured his lordship. 'You may assist me into this coat. Thanks.'

With no little difficulty, my lord managed to enter into the fine satin garment, which, when on, seemed moulded to his back, so excellently did it fit. He shook out his ruffles and slipped the emerald ring on to his finger with a slight frown.

'I believe I shall remain here some few days,' he remarked presently. 'To – ah – allay suspicion.' He looked across at his man as he spoke, through his lashes.

It was not in Jim's nature to inquire into his master's affairs, much less to be surprised at anything he might do or say. He was content to receive and promptly execute his orders, and to worship Carstares with a dog-like devotion, following blindly in his wake, happy as long as he might serve him.

Carstares had found him in France, very down upon his luck, having been discharged from the service of his late master owing to the penniless condition of that gentleman's pocket. He had engaged him as his own personal servant, and the man had remained with him ever since, proving an invaluable acquisition to my Lord John. Despite a singularly wooden countenance, he was by no means a fool, and he had helped Carstares out of more than one tight corner during his inglorious and foolhardy career as highwayman. He probably understood his somewhat erratic master better than anyone else, and he now divined what was in his mind. He returned that glance with a significant wink.

''Twas them gentlemen ye held up to-day sir!' he asked, jerking an expressive thumb towards the window.

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'M'm. Mr Bumble Bee and friend. It would almost appear so. I think I do not fully appreciate Mr Bumble Bee. I find his conduct rather tiresome. But it is just possible that he thinks the same of me. I will further my acquaintance with him.'

Jim grunted scornfully, and an inquiring eye was cocked at him.

'You do not admire our friend? Pray, do not judge him by his exterior. He may possess a beautiful mind. But I do not think so. N-no, I really do not think so.' He chuckled a little. 'Do you know, Jim, I believe I am going to enjoy myself to-night!'

'I don't doubt it, your honour. 'Twere child's play to trick the fat gentleman.'

'Probably. But it is not with the fat gentleman that I shall have to deal. 'Tis with all the officials of this charming town, an I mistake not. Do I hear the small spider returning?'

Salter stepped back to the window.

'Ay, sir – with three others.'

'Pre-cisely. Be so good as to hand me my snuff-box. And my cane. Thank you. I feel the time has now come for me to put in an appearance. Pray, bear in mind that I am new come from France and journey by easy stages to London. And cultivate a stupid expression. Yes, that will do excellently.'

Jim grinned delightedly; he had assumed no expression of stupidity, and was consequently much pleased with this pleasantry. He swung open the door with an air, and watched 'Sir Anthony' mince along the passage to the stairs.

In the coffee-room the city merchant, Mr Fudby by name, was relating the story of his wrongs, with many an impressive pause, and much emphasis, to the mayor, town-clerk, and beadle of Lewes. All three had been fetched by Mr Chilter, his clerk, in obedience to his orders, for the bigger the audience the better pleased was Mr Fudby. He was now enjoying himself quite considerably, despite the loss of his precious cash-box.

So was not Mr Hedges, the mayor. He was a fussy little man who suffered from dyspepsia; he was not interested in the affair, and he did not see what was to be done for Mr Fudby. Further,

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he had been haled from his dinner, and he was hungry; and, above all, he found Mr Fudby very unattractive. Still, a highroad robbery was serious matter enough, and some course of action must be thought out; so he listened to the story with an assumption of interest, looking exceedingly wise, and, at the proper moments, uttering sounds betokening concern.

The more he saw and heard of Mr Fudby, the less he liked him. Neither did the town-clerk care for him. There was that about Mr Fudby that did not endear him to his fellow-men, especially when they chanced to be his inferiors in the social scale. The beadle did not think much about anything. Having decided (and rightly) that the affair had nothing whatever to do with him, he leaned back in his chair and stared stolidly up at the ceiling.

The tale Mr Fudby was telling bore surprisingly little resemblance to the truth. It was a much embellished version, in which he himself had behaved with quite remarkable gallantry. It had been gradually concocted during the journey to Lewes.

He was still holding forth when my lord entered the room. Carstares raised his glass languidly to survey the assembled company, bowed slightly, and walked over to the fire. He seated himself in an armchair and took no further notice of anybody.

Mr Hedges had recognised at a glance that here was some *grand seigneur* and wished that Mr Fudby would not speak in so loud a voice. But that individual, delighted at having a new auditor, continued his tale with much relish and in a still louder tone.

My lord yawned delicately and took a pinch of snuff.

'Yes, yes,' fussed Mr Hedges. 'But, short of sending to London for the Runners, I do not see what I can do. If I send to London, it must, of course, be at your expense, sir.'

Mr Fudby bristled.

'At *my* expense, sir? Do ye say at *my* expense? I am surprised! I repeat – I am surprised!'

'Indeed, sir? I can order the town-crier out, describing the horse, and – er – offering a reward for the capture of any man on such animal. But –' he shrugged and looked across at the town-

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clerk – 'I do not imagine that 'twould be of much use – eh, Mr Brand?'

The clerk pursed his lips and spread out his hands.

'I fear not; I very much fear not. I would advise Mr Fudby to have a proclamation posted up round the country.' He sat back with the air of one who has contributed his share to the work, and does not intend to offer any more help.

'Ho!' growled Mr Fudby. He blew out his cheeks. ''Twill be a grievous expense, though I suppose it must be done, and I cannot but feel that if it had not been for your deplorably cowardly conduct, Chilter – yes, cowardly conduct I say – I might never have been robbed of my two hundred!' He snuffled a little, and eyed the flushed but silent Chilter with mingled reproach and scorn. 'However, my coachman assures me he could swear to the horse again, although he cannot remember much about the man himself. Chilter! How did he describe the horse?'

'Oh – er – chestnut, Mr Fudby – chestnut, with a half-moon of white on its forehead, and one white foreleg.'

Jack perceived that it was time he took a hand in the game. He half turned in his chair and levelled his quizzing-glass at Mr Chilter.

'I beg your pardon?' he drawled.

Mr Fudby's eyes brightened. The fine gentleman was roused to an expression of interest at last. He launched forth into his story once more for my lord's benefit. Carstares eyed him coldly, seeing which, Mr Hedges came hurriedly to the rescue.

'Er – yes, Mr Fudby – quite so! Your pardon, sir, I have not the honour of knowing your name?'

'Ferndale,' supplied Jack, 'Sir Anthony Ferndale.'

'Er – yes –' Mr Hedges bowed. 'Pray pardon my importuning you with our –'

'Not at all,' said my lord.

'No – quite so – The fact is, these – er – gentlemen have had the – er – misfortune to be waylaid on their journey here.'

Sir Anthony's glass was again levelled at the group. His expression betokened mild surprise.

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