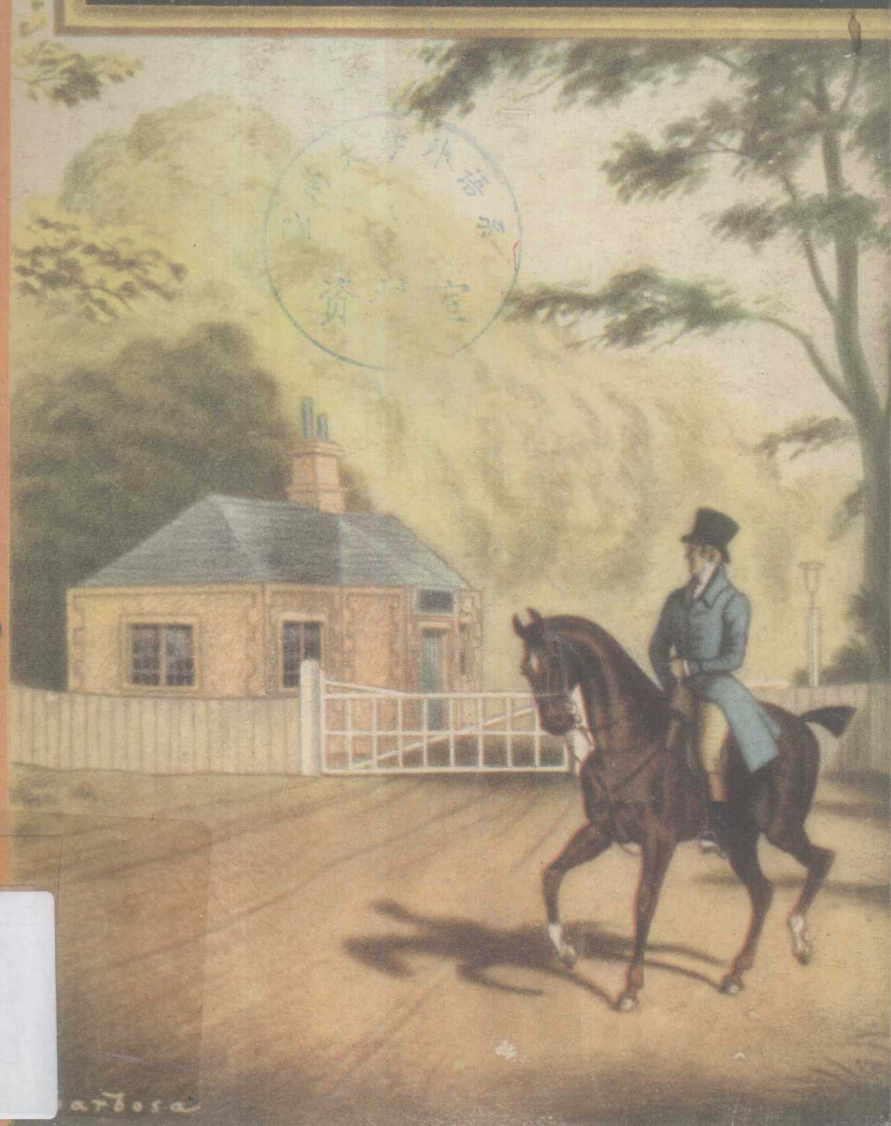


The
TOLL-GATE
Georgette Heyer



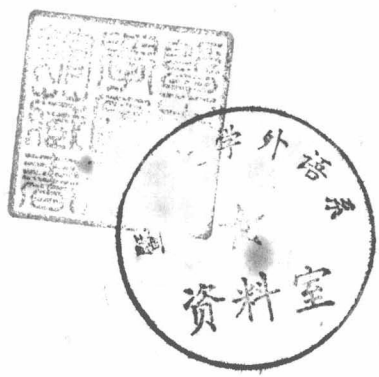
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THE TOLL-GATE

by

Georgette Heyer



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CHAPTER I

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 overlarge 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 overpoweringly 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 Tackenhams 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.

CHAPTER II

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 portman-teaux, 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 saddle-holsters, and led the bay up to the house. The Captain, attired in buckskin breeches and topboots, 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 respecta-

bility. 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 circum-