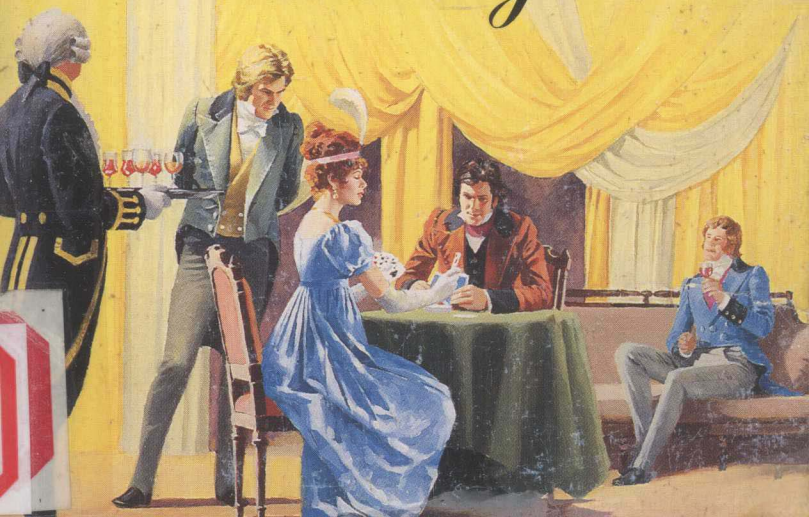


THE NOVELS OF
GEORGETTE
HEYER

Faró's Daughter



GEORGETTE HEYER

Faro's Daughter

Mandarin

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FARO'S DAUGHTER

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CHAPTER I

UPON her butler's announcing the arrival of Mr Ravenscar, Lady Mablethorpe, who had been dozing over a novel from the Circulating Library, sat up with a jerk, and raised a hand to her dishevelled cap. 'What's that you say? Mr Ravenscar? Desire him to come upstairs at once.'

While the butler went to convey this message to the morning-caller, her ladyship tidied her ruffled person, fortified herself with a sniff at her vinaigrette, and disposed herself on the sofa to receive her guest.

The gentleman who was presently ushered into the room was some twenty years her junior, and looked singularly out of place in a lady's boudoir. He was very tall, with a good pair of legs, encased in buckskins and topboots, fine broad shoulders under a coat of superfine cloth, and a lean, harsh-featured countenance with an uncompromising mouth and extremely hard grey eyes. His hair, which was black, and slightly curling, was cut into something perilously near a Bedford crop. Lady Mablethorpe, who belonged to an older generation, and herself continued to make free use of the pounce-box, in spite of Mr Pitt's iniquitous tax on hair-powder, could never look upon the new heads without a shudder. She shuddered now, as her affronted gaze took in not only her nephew's abominable crop but also the careless set of his coat, his topboots, the single spur he wore, and the negligent way he had tied his cravat, and thrust its ends through a gold-edged button-hole. She raised the vinaigrette to her nostrils again, and said in a fading voice: 'Upon my word, Max! Whenever I clap eyes on you I fancy I can smell the stables!'

Mr Ravenscar strolled across the room, and took up a

position with his back to the fire. 'And can you?' he enquired amiably.

Lady Mablethorpe chose to ignore this exasperating question. 'Why, in the name of heaven, only one spur?' she demanded.

'That's the high kick of fashion,' said Ravenscar.

'It makes you look for all the world like a postilion.'

'It's meant to.'

'And you know very well that you do not care a snap for the fashion! I beg you will not teach Adrian to make such a vulgar spectacle of himself!'

Mr Ravenscar raised his brows. 'I'm not likely to put myself to so much trouble,' he said.

This assurance did nothing to mollify his aunt. She said severely that the fashion of waiting upon ladies in garments fit only for Newmarket was not one which she had until this day encountered.

'I've this instant ridden into town,' said Mr Ravenscar, with an indifference which robbed his explanation of all semblance of apology. 'I thought you wanted to see me.'

'I have been wanting to see you these five days and more. Where in the world have you been, tiresome creature? I drove round Grosvenor Square, only to find the house shut up, and the knocker off the door.'

'I've been down at Chamfreys.'

'Oh, indeed! Well, I'm sure I hope you found your Mama in good health—not but what it's the height of absurdity to call Mrs Ravenscar your mother, for she's no such thing, and of all the foolish——'

'I don't,' said Ravenscar briefly.

'Well, I hope you found her in good health,' repeated Lady Mablethorpe, a trifle disconcerted.

'I didn't find her at all. She is at Tunbridge Wells, with Arabella.'

At the mention of her niece, Lady Mablethorpe's eyes

brightened. 'The dear child!' she said. 'And how is she, Max?'

The thought of his young half-sister appeared to afford Mr Ravenscar no gratification. 'She's a devilish nuisance,' he replied.

A shade of uneasiness crossed her ladyship's plump countenance. 'Oh, indeed? Of course, she is very young, and I daresay Mrs Ravenscar indulges her more than she should. But——'

'Olivia is as big a fool as Arabella,' responded Ravenscar shortly. 'They are both coming up to town next week. The 14th Foot are stationed near the Wells.'

This grim pronouncement apparently conveyed a world of information to Lady Mablethorpe. After a somewhat pensive pause, she said: 'It is time dear Arabella was thinking of marriage. After all, I was married when I was scarce——'

'She never thinks of anything else,' said Ravenscar. 'The latest is some nameless whelp in a scarlet coat.'

'You ought to keep her more under your eye,' said his aunt. 'You are as much her guardian as Mrs Ravenscar.'

'I'm going to,' said Ravenscar.

'Perhaps if we could marry her suitably——'

'My dear ma'am,' said Mr Ravenscar impatiently, 'Arabella is no more fit to be married than if she were still in long coats! I have it from Olivia that she has been head over ears in love with no fewer than five aspiring gentlemen in as many months.'

'Good God, Max! If you don't take care, we shall have some dreadful fortune-hunter running off with her!'

'It wouldn't surprise me at all.'

Lady Mablethorpe showed slight signs of agitation. 'You are the most provoking creature! How can you talk in that cool way about such a disastrous possibility?'

'Well, at least I should be rid of her,' said Mr Ravenscar

callously. 'If you're thinking of marrying her to Adrian, I can tell you now that——'

'Oh, Max, that is what I wanted to see you about!' interrupted his aunt, recalled by the mention of her son's name to the more pressing problem of the moment. 'I am quite distracted with worry!'

'Oh?' said Ravenscar, with casual interest. 'What's the young fool been doing?'

Lady Mablethorpe bristled instinctively at this uncomplimentary description of her only child, but a moment's reflection brought the unwelcome conviction that the slighting term had been earned. 'He thinks he is in love,' she said tragically.

Mr Ravenscar was unmoved. 'He'll think it a good many times for the next five or six years. How old is the cub?'

'Considering you are one of his trustees, you surely know that he is not yet twenty-one!'

'Forbid the banns, then,' recommended Mr Ravenscar flippantly.

'I wish you will be serious! This is no laughing matter! He will be of age in a couple of months now! And before we know where we are we shall have him married to some scheming hussy!'

'I should think it extremely unlikely, ma'am. Let the boy alone. Damme, he must cut his milk teeth sometime!'

Lady Mablethorpe flushed angrily. 'It is all very well for you to stand there, talking in that odious way, as though you did not care a fig, but——'

'I'm only responsible for his fortune,' he said.

'I might have known you would have come here only to be disagreeable! Wash your hands of my poor boy by all means: I'm sure it's only what I expected. But don't blame *me* if he contracts the most shocking misalliance!'

'Who is the girl?' asked Mr Ravenscar.

‘A creature—oh, a *hussy*!—out of a gaming-house!’

‘*What?*’ demanded Ravenscar incredulously.

‘I thought you would not be quite so cool when you heard the full sum of it!’ said her ladyship, with a certain morbid satisfaction. ‘I was never so appalled in my life as when I heard of it! I went immediately to your house. Something must be done, Max!’

He shrugged. ‘Oh, let him amuse himself! It don’t signify. She may cost him less than an opera-dancer.’

‘She will cost him a great deal more!’ said her ladyship tartly. ‘He means to marry the creature!’

‘Nonsense! He’s not such a fool. One does not marry women out of gaming-houses.’

‘I wish you will tell him so, for he will pay no heed to anything I say. He will have us believe that the girl is quite something out of the common way, if you please. Of course, it is as clear as daylight. The dear boy is as innocent as a lamb, and full of the most nonsensical romantic notions! That hateful, vulgar, scheming woman lured him to her house, and the niece did the rest. You may depend upon it she meant to have him from the start. Sally Repton tells me that it is positively absurd to see how Adrian worships the wench. There is no doing anything with him. She will have to be bought off. That is why I sent for you.’ She observed a distinctly saturnine look in Mr Ravenscar’s eye, and added with something of a snap: ‘You need not be afraid, Max! I hope I know better than to expect you to lay out any of *your* odious wealth on the business!’

‘I hope you do, aunt, for I shall certainly do no such thing.’

‘It would be a very odd thing if anyone were to ask you to,’ she said severely. ‘Not but what you would scarcely notice the expenditure, as wealthy as you are. Indeed, I cannot imagine how you contrive to spend the half of your income, and I must say, Max, that nobody would

suppose, from the appearance you present, that you are quite the richest man in town.'

'Are you complimenting me upon my lack of ostentation, ma'am?'

'No, I am not,' said her ladyship acidly. 'There is nothing I have ever felt the least desire to compliment you on. I wish to heaven there were someone other than yourself to whom I could turn in this fetch. You are hard, and unfeeling, Max, and excessively selfish.'

He sought in the recesses of his pocket for his snuff-box, and drew it out, and opened it. 'Try Uncle Julius,' he suggested.

'That old woman!' exclaimed Lady Mablethorpe, disposing of her brother-in-law in one contemptuous phrase. 'Pray, what could he do to the purpose?'

'Sympathize with you,' said Mr Ravenscar, taking snuff. He saw the vinaigrette come into play, and shut his snuff-box with a snap. 'Well, you had better tell me who this Cyprian of Adrian's is.'

'She is that vulgar Lady Bellingham's niece—or so they pretend,' answered Lady Mablethorpe, abandoning the vinaigrette. 'You must know Eliza Bellingham! She keeps a gaming-house in St James's Square.'

'One of the Archer-Buckingham kidney?'

'Precisely so. Well, I don't say she is as bad as that precious pair, for, indeed, who could be?—but it's all the same. She was Ned Bellingham's wife, and I for one never thought her good *ton* at all, while we all know what Bellingham was!'

'I seem to be singularly ignorant.'

'Oh well, it was before your day! It doesn't signify, for he's been dead these fifteen years: drank himself into his grave, though they called it an inflammation of the lungs—fiddle! Of course he left her with a pile of debts, just as anyone might have expected. I'm sure I don't know how

she contrived to live until she started her wretched gaming-house: I daresay she might have rich relatives. But that's neither here nor there. You may see her everywhere; she rents her box at the opera, even! but no person of *ton* will recognize her.'

'How does she fill her house, then? I suppose it is the usual thing?—Discreet cards of invitation, handsome supper, any quantity of inferior wine, E.O. and faro-tables set out above-stairs?'

'I was referring to ladies of breeding,' said his aunt coldly. 'It is well known, alas, that gentlemen will go anywhere for the sake of gaming!'

He made her a slight, ironical bow. 'Also, if my memory serves me, Lady Sarah Repton.'

'I make no excuse for Sally. But duke's daughter or not, I should never think of describing her as of good *ton*!'

He looked faintly amused. 'I wish you will enlighten me: do you recognize her?'

'Don't be absurd, I beg of you! Naturally Sally has the entrée everywhere. Eliza Bellingham is quite another matter, and you may depend upon it that although Sally may go to her house, she does not set foot in Sally's! It was Sally who warned me of what was going forward. As you may suppose, I immediately taxed Adrian with it.'

'That is what I supposed,' agreed Mr Ravenscar, looking sardonic.

Lady Mablethorpe cast him a glance of scornful dislike. 'You need not imagine that I am a fool, Max. Of course I went tactfully about the business, never supposing for an instant that I should discover the affair to be more than a—than a—— Well, you know what anyone would expect, hearing that a young man had become enamoured of a wench from a gaming-house! You may conceive my dismay when Adrian at once, and without the least hesitation, informed me that he was indeed madly in love with

the girl, and meant to marry her! Max, I was so taken aback that I could not utter a word!

'Has he taken leave of his senses?' demanded Mr Ravenscar.

'He is just like his father,' said Lady Mablethorpe, in a despairing way. 'Depend upon it, he has taken some romantic maggot into his head! You know how he was for ever reading tales of chivalry, and such nonsense, when he was a boy! This is what comes of it! I wish I had sent him to Eton.'

Mr Ravenscar raised his eyes, and thoughtfully contemplated the portrait which hung on the wall opposite to him. It depicted a young man in a blue coat, who looked out of the picture with a faint smile in his fine eyes. He was a handsome young man, hardly more than a boy. He wore his own fair hair tied in the nape of his neck, and supported his chin on one slender, beautiful hand. His expression was one of great sweetness, but there was a hint of obstinacy in the curve of his lips, at odd variance with the dreamy softness of his eyes.

Lady Mablethorpe followed the direction of her nephew's gaze, and herself studied, with misgiving, the portrait of the 4th Viscount. A despondent sigh escaped her; she transferred her attention to Mr Ravenscar. 'What's to be done, Max?' she asked.

'He can't marry the wench.'

'Will you speak to him?'

'Certainly not.'

'It is very difficult to do so, I own, but he might be brought to attend to you.'

'I can conceive of nothing more unlikely. What figure will you go to to buy the girl off?'

'No sacrifice would be too great to save my son from such an entanglement! I shall rely on you, for I know nothing of such matters. Only rescue the poor boy!'

'It will go very much against the grain,' said Ravenscar grimly.

Lady Mablethorpe stiffened. 'Indeed! Pray, what may you mean by that?'

'A constitutional dislike of being bled, ma'am.'

'Oh!' she said, relaxing. 'You may console yourself with the reflection that it is I, not you, being bled.'

'It is a slight consolation,' he admitted.

'I have not the least doubt that you will find the girl rapacious. Sally tells me that she is at least five years older than Adrian.'

'She's a fool if she accepts less than ten thousand,' said Ravenscar.

Lady Mablethorpe's jaw dropped. 'Max!'

He shrugged. 'Adrian is not precisely a pauper, my dear aunt. There is also the title. Ten thousand.'

'It seems wicked!'

'It is wicked.'

'I should like to strangle the abominable creature!'

'Unfortunately, the laws of this land preclude your pursuing that admirable course.'

'We shall have to pay,' she said, in a hollow voice. 'It would be useless, I am persuaded, to appeal to the woman.'

'You would make a great mistake to betray so much weakness.'

'Nothing would induce me to speak to such a woman! Only fancy, Max! she presides over the tables in that horrid house! You may imagine what a bold, vulgar piece she is! Sally says that all the worst rakes in town go there, and she bestows her favours on such men as that dreadful Lord Ormskirk. He is for ever at her side. I daresay she is more to him than my deluded boy dreams of. But it is useless to suggest such a thing! He fired up in an instant.'

'Ormskirk, eh?' said Ravenscar thoughtfully. 'That

settles it: any attempt to bring to reasonable terms a lady in the habit of encouraging his attentions would certainly be doomed to failure. I had thought better of Adrian.'

'You can't blame him,' said Lady Mablethorpe. 'What experience has he had of such people? Ten to one, the girl told him some affecting story about herself! Besides, she is quite lovely, according to what Sally Repton says. I suppose there is no hope of her deciding in Ormskirk's favour?'

'Not the smallest chance of it, I imagine. Ormskirk won't marry her.'

Lady Mablethorpe showed signs of dissolving into tears. 'Oh, Max, what is to be done if she won't relinquish him?'

'She must be made to relinquish him.'

'If it were not for the unsettled state of everything on the Continent, I should feel inclined to send him abroad! Only I daresay he would refuse to go.'

'Very likely.'

Lady Mablethorpe dabbed at her eyes. 'It would kill me if my son were to be caught by such a female!'

'I doubt it, but you need not put yourself about, ma'am. He will not be caught by her.'

She was a little comforted by this pronouncement. 'I knew I could rely upon you, Max! What do you mean to do?'

'See the charmer for myself,' he replied. 'St James's Square, you said?'

'Yes, but you know how careful these houses have to be, Max, on account of the law-officers. I daresay they won't admit you, if you have no card.'

'Not admit the rich Mr Ravenscar?' he said cynically. 'My dear aunt! I shall be welcomed with open arms.'

'Well, I hope they won't fleece you,' said Lady Mablethorpe.

'On the contrary, you hope they will,' he retorted. 'But I am a very ill bird for plucking.'

'If Adrian meets you there, he will suspect your purpose. He will certainly think that I sent you.'

'Deny it,' said Ravenscar, bored.

Lady Mablethorpe started to deliver herself of an improving lecture on the evils of deception, but, finding that her nephew was quite unimpressed, stopped, and said with a somewhat vindictive note in her voice: 'I beg that you will take care, Max! They say the girl is like a honey-pot, and I'm sure I've no wish to see *you* caught in her toils.'

He laughed. 'There is not the slightest need for you to concern yourself about me, ma'am. I am neither twenty years of age, nor of a romantic disposition. You had better not tell Adrian that I have been here. No doubt I shall see him in St James's Square this evening.'

She held out her hand to him, a good deal mollified. 'You are a most provoking man, Max, but indeed I don't know what I should do without you! You will manage it all: I depend entirely upon you!'

'For once,' said Mr Ravenscar, raising her hand formally to his lips, 'you may quite safely do so.'

He took his leave of her, and departed. She opened her book again, but sat for a few moments gazing into the fire, her mind pleasantly occupied with daydreams. Once extricated from his present predicament, she had great hopes that her son would have learnt his lesson, and keep clear of any further entanglements. The account Ravenscar had brought of his half-sister's activities had not been entirely palatable, but Lady Mablethorpe was a broad-minded woman, disinclined to set much store by the vagaries of a young lady of only eighteen summers. To be sure, it was unfortunate that Arabella should be such a flirt, but what, in another damsel, would have been a

shocking fault, was, in such a notable heiress, a mere whimsicality of youth. Flirt or not, Lady Mablethorpe had every intention of seeing Arabella married to her son. Nothing, she thought, could be more suitable. Arabella had birth, fortune, and prettiness; she had known her cousin intimately since babyhood, and would make him a very good wife. Lady Mablethorpe had not the smallest objection to the child's liveliness: she thought it very taking, coupled, as it had always been, with a graceful, playful deference towards her aunt.

The recollection of the nameless suitor in a scarlet coat momentarily disturbed her ladyship's complacent dream. She soon banished it, reflecting that Max could be counted upon to put a stop to any such nonsense. Callous he might be, but he was not at all the man to stand idle while Arabella bestowed herself and her eighty thousand pounds on some nobody in a line regiment. For herself, Lady Mablethorpe was obliged to admit that it would be a shocking thing for Arabella to bestow these rich gifts on any other man than young Lord Mablethorpe.

She was not, she insisted, a mercenary woman, and if her dearest boy disliked his cousin she would be the last to urge him into matrimony with her. But eighty thousand pounds, safely invested in the Funds! Any woman of common prudence must wish to see this fortune added to the family coffers, particularly since (if Max were to be believed) the staggering sum of ten thousand pounds would shortly have to be disgorged from the amassed interest of Adrian's long minority. In this connection, thought her ladyship, it was a fortunate circumstance that the conduct of all the business of the Mablethorpe estate had been left in Max's capable hands rather than in the Honourable Julius Mablethorpe's. There was no doubt that Max had a very shrewd head on his shoulders. Thanks, in a great measure, to his management, Adrian would find himself

when he came of age (and in spite of the loss of that ten thousand pounds) the master of a very pretty fortune. It would not compare, of course, with the Ravenscar wealth, a melancholy circumstance which had for years caused her ladyship a quite irrational annoyance. She had even, upon occasion, wished that she had a daughter who might have married Max.

She could have borne it better if she could have had the satisfaction of seeing him squandering his wealth. But this solace was denied her. Mr Ravenscar had simple tastes. He kept up a large house in Grosvenor Square, to be sure, and his country estate, Chamfreys, was a noble mansion, with a deer-park, some very good shooting, and a vast acreage attached to it, but he held no magnificent house-parties there, which he might, thought his aggrieved aunt, very well have done, with his stepmother to play hostess. That would have given the second Mrs Ravenscar something better to think about than her health. The second Mrs Ravenscar's health was a subject which, while it in no way concerned her, never failed to irritate Lady Mablethorpe. Her ladyship inhabited a very pretty house in Brook Street, but would infinitely have preferred to live in Grosvenor Square, where she could have entertained on a large scale. It was thus a source of continual annoyance to her that her sister-in-law should declare that the delicate state of her nerves could not support the racket of London, and should spend the best part of her time at Bath, or Tunbridge Wells. Such parties as Max gave, therefore, were either bachelor gatherings, or of a nature which must preclude his asking his aunt to act as hostess for him. She wondered that he should care to live in solitary state in such a barrack of a house!

She wondered too, being herself a woman of gregarious tastes, that he should care so little for all the accepted pleasures of his world. You might look in vain for

Mr Ravenscar at balls, ridottos, and masquerades: ten to one, he would be at a cockfight, or rubbing shoulders with prize-fighters in some vulgar tavern in Whitechapel. He was a member of a number of fashionable clubs, but rarely visited most of them. His aunt had heard that he played a good deal at Brooks's, where the play was very deep, and she knew that his horses were the envy of his friends; but these were positively his only extravagances. While the town swarmed with Bucks and Jessamines, and even men who did not aspire to these heights of fashion would spend hours on the designing of a waistcoat, and fortunes on rings, fobs, shoebuckles, and pins, Mr Ravenscar wasted neither time nor money on anything but his boots (which were admittedly excellent), and had never been seen to wear any other ornament than the heavy gold signet ring which adorned his left hand.

He was thirty-five years of age, and it was now a considerable time since any but the most optimistic of match-making mothers had entertained hopes of his casting the handkerchief in her daughter's direction. There had been a time when he had been the most courted man in London; invitations had showered upon him; the most wily traps had been laid for him; but the indifference with which he regarded all eligible females (an indifference which he was never at any pains to hide), his cold reserve, and his habit of pleasing himself upon all occasions, had at last convinced the disappointed matrons that there was nothing whatever to be hoped for from him, not even some pretty, expensive trinket to mark his regard for those ladies who thought themselves his friends. Mr Ravenscar gave nothing away. No use thinking that he would gallantly offer to frank you at whist, or silver loo: he was far more likely to arise from the table further enriched by your losses. It was small consolation to reflect that ladies of easier virtue with whom his name had been coupled from