

MIDAS AND SON

CHAPTER I

SI VIEILLESSE SAVAIT . . .

Life is like playing a violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on.

SAMUEL BUTLER: *Essays on Life, Art and Science.*

I

As Sir Aylmer Lancing's car wound between the high banks of rhododendrons which skirted the two-mile drive to Ripley Court, he leaned forward critically to catch a glimpse of the preparations for his son's return to England. For two years all but the south-east wing of the great Elizabethan house had been closed; he had been wheeled from his bedroom on the ground floor to the study, estate-room or office, thence to the dining-room and back again to bed without the strength or wish once to penetrate the sound-proof double doors which divided and screened him from the panelled central hall and the far south-western wing where his son's library and music-room were situated. In two years the twelve-foot front door, surmounted by the Stornaway arms, had never been publicly opened; Sir Aylmer and the vicarious philanthropists who were his only visitors came and went by the side entrance leading to the Chapel.

To-day every blind was up, every window shone in the treacherous February sunlight, and the front door was unbarred and open. Thick spirals of smoke curled from unfamiliar chimneys, and the housemaids in print dresses