ALLEN GRANT

WHAT'S BRED IN THE BONE

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Allen G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
ELMA'S STRANGER

It was late when Elma reached the station. Her pony had jibbed on the way downhill, and the train was just on the point of moving off as she hurried upon the platform. Old Matthews, the stout and chubby-cheeked station-master, seized her most unceremoniously by the left arm, and bundled her into a carriage. He had known her from a child, so he could venture upon such liberties.

"Second class, miss? Yes, miss. Here y'are. Look sharp, please. Any more goin' on? All right, Tom! Go ahead there!" And lifting his left hand, he whistled a shrill signal to the guard to start her.

As for Elma, somewhat hot in the face with the wild rush for her ticket, and grasping her uncounted change, pence and all, in her little gloved hand, she found herself thrust, hap-hazard, at the very last moment, into the last compartment of the last carriage—alone—with an artist.

Now, you and I, to be sure, most proverbially courteous and intelligent reader, might never have guessed at first sight, from the young man's outer aspect, the nature of his occupation. The gross and clumsy male intellect, which works in accordance with the stupid laws of inductive logic, has a queer habit of requiring something or other, in the way of definite evidence, before it commits itself offhand to the distinct conclusion. But Elma Clifford was a woman; and therefore she knew a more excellent way. HER habit was, rather to look things once fairly and squarely in the face, and then, with the unerring intuition of her sex, to make up her mind about them firmly, at once and for ever. That's one of the many glorious advantages of being born a woman. You don't need to learn in order to know. You know instinctively. And yet our girls want to go to Girton, and train themselves up to be senior wranglers!

Elma Clifford, however, had NOT been to Girton, so, as she stumbled into her place, she snatched one hurried look at Cyril Wiring's face, and knew at a glance he was a landscape painter.

Now, this was clever of her, even in a woman, for Cyril Waring, as he fondly imagined, was travelling that line that day disguised as a stock-broker. In other words, there was none of the brown velveteen affectation about his easy get-up. He was an artist, to be sure, but he hadn't assiduously and obtrusively dressed his character. Instead of cutting his beard to a Vandyke point, or enduing his body in a Titianesque coat, or wearing on his head a slouched Rembrandt hat, stuck carelessly just a trifle on one side in artistic disorder, he was habited, for all the world like anybody else, in the grey tweed suit of the common British tourist, surmounted by the light felt hat (or bowler), to match, of the modern English country gentleman. Even the soft silk necktie of a delicate aesthetic hue that adorned his open throat didn't proclaim him at once a painter by trade. It showed him merely as a man of taste, with a decided eye for harmonies of colour.

So when Elma pronounced her fellow-traveller immediately, in her own mind, a landscape artist, she was exercising the familiar feminine prerogative of jumping, as if by magic, to a correct conclusion. It's a provoking way they have, those inscrutable women, which no mere male human being can ever conceivably fathom.

She was just about to drop down, as propriety demands, into the corner seat diagonally opposite to—and therefore as far as possible away from—her handsome companion, when the stranger rose, and, with a very flushed face, said, in a hasty, though markedly deferential and apologetic tone—

"I beg your pardon, but—excuse me for mentioning it—I think you're going to sit down upon—ur—pray don't be frightened—a rather large snake of mine."

There was something so comically alarmed in the ring of his tone—as of a naughty schoolboy detected in a piece of mischief—that, propriety to the contrary notwithstanding, Elma couldn't for the life of her repress a smile. She looked down at the seat where the stranger pointed, and there, sure enough, coiled up in huge folds, with his glossy head in attitude to spring at her, a great banded snake lay alert and open-eyed.

"Dear me," Elma cried, drawing back a little in surprise, but not at all in horror, as she felt she ought to do. "A snake! How curious! I hope he's not dangerous."

"Not at all," the young man answered, still in the same half-guilty tone of voice as before. "He's of a poisonous kind, you know; but his fangs have been extracted. He won't do you any injury. He's perfectly harmless. Aren't you, Sardanapalus? Eh, eh, my beauty? But I oughtn't to have let him loose in the carriage, of course," he added, after a short pause. "It's calculated to alarm a nervous passenger. Only I thought I was alone, and nobody would come in; so I let him out for a bit of a run between the stations. It's so dull for him, poor fellow, being shut up in his box all the time when he's travelling."

Elma looked down at the beautiful glossy creature with genuine admiration. His skin was like enamel; his banded scales shone bright and silvery. She didn't know why, but somehow she felt she wasn't in the least afraid of him. "I suppose one ought to be repelled at once by a snake," she said, taking the opposite seat, and keeping her glance fixed firmly upon the reptile's eye; "but then, this is such a handsome one! I can't say why, but I don't feel afraid of him at all as I ought, to do. Every right-minded person detests snakes, don't they? And yet, how exquisitely flexible and beautiful he is! Oh, pray don't put him back in his box for me. He's basking in the sun here. I should be sorry to disturb him."

Cyril Waring looked at her in considerable surprise. He caught the creature in his hands as he spoke, and transferred it at once to a tin box, with a perforated lid, that lay beside him. "Go back, Sardanapalus," he said, in a very musical and pleasant voice, forcing the huge beast into the lair with gentle but masterful hands. "Go back, and go to sleep, sir. It's time for your nap. … Oh no, I couldn't think of letting him out any more in the carriage to the annoyance of others. I'm ashamed enough as it is of having unintentionally alarmed you. But you came in so unexpectedly, you see, I hadn't time to put my queer pet away; and, when the door opened, I was afraid he might slip out, or get under the seats, so all I could do was just to soothe him with my hand, and keep him quiet till the door was shut to again."

"Indeed, I wasn't at all afraid of him," Elma answered, slipping her change into her pocket, and looking prettier through her blush than even her usual self. "On the contrary, I really liked to see him. He's such a glorious snake! The lights and shades on his back are so glancing and so wonderful! He's a perfect model. Of course, you're painting him."

The stranger started. "I'm painting him—yes, that's true," he replied, with a look of sudden surprise; "but why 'of course,' please? How on earth could you tell I was an artist even?"

Elma glanced back in his face, and wondered to herself, too. Now she came to think of it, HOW did she know that handsome young man, with the charming features, and the expressive eyes, and the neatly-cut brown beard, and the attractive manner, was an artist at all, or anything like it? And how did she know the snake was his model? For the life of her, she couldn't have answered those questions herself.

"I suppose I just guessed it," she answered, after a short pause, blushing still more deeply at the sudden way she had thus been dragged into conversation with the good-looking stranger. Elma's skin was dark—a clear and creamy olive-brown complexion, such as one sometimes sees in southern Europe, though rarely in England; and the effect of the blush through it didn't pass unnoticed by Cyril Waring's artistic eye. He would have given something for the chance of transferring that delicious effect to canvas. The delicate transparency of the blush threw up those piercing dark eyes, and reflected lustre even on the glossy black hair that fringed her forehead. Not an English type of beauty

at all, Elma Clifford's, he thought to himself as he eyed her closely: rather Spanish or Italian, or say even Hungarian.

"Well, you guessed right, at any rate," he went on, settling down in his seat once more, after boxing his snake, but this time face to face with her. "I'm working at a beautiful bit of fern and foliage —quite tropical in its way—in a wood hereabout; and I've introduced Sardanapalus, coiled up in the foreground, just to give life to the scene, don't you know, and an excuse for a title. I mean to call it 'The Rajah's Rest.' Behind, great ferns and a mossy bank; in front, Sardanapalus, after tiffin, rolled spirally round, and taking his siesta."

This meeting was a long-wished-for occasion. Elma had never before met a real live painter. Now, it was the cherished idea of her youth to see something some day of that wonderful non-existent fantastic world which we still hope for and dream about and call Bohemia. She longed to move in literary and artistic circles. She had fashioned to herself, like many other romantic girls, a rose-coloured picture of Bohemian existence; not knowing indeed that Bohemia is now, alas! an extinct province, since Belgravia and Kensington swallowed it bodily down, digested, and assimilated it. So this casual talk with the handsome young artist in the second-class carriage, on the Great Southern line, was to Elma as a charming and delightful glimpse of an enchanted region she could never enter. It was Paradise to the Peri. She turned the conversation at once, therefore, with resolute intent upon art and artists, determined to make the most while it lasted of this unique opportunity. And since the subject of self, with an attentive listener, is always an attractive one, even to modest young men like Cyril Waring—especially when it's a pretty girl who encourages you to dilate upon it—why, the consequence was, that before many minutes were over, the handsome young man was discoursing from his full heart to a sympathetic soul about his chosen art, its hopes and its ideals, accompanied, by a running fire of thumb-nail illustrations. He had even got so far in the course of their intimacy as to take out the portfolio, which lay hidden under the seat—out of deference to his disguise as a stock-broker, no doubt—and to display before Elma's delighted eyes, with many explanatory comments as to light and shade, or perspective and foreshortening, the studies for the picture he had just then engaged upon.

By-and-by, as his enthusiasm warmed under Elma's encouragement, the young artist produced Sardanapalus himself once more from his box, and with deftly persuasive fingers coiled him gracefully round on the opposite seat into the precise attitude he was expected to take up when he sat for his portrait in the mossy foreground.

Elma couldn't say why, but that creature fascinated her. The longer she looked at him the more intensely he interested her. Not that she was one bit afraid of him, as she might reasonably have expected to be, according to all womanly precedent. On the contrary, she felt an overwhelming desire to take him up in her own hands and stroke and fondle him. He was so lithe and beautiful; his scales so glistened! At last she stretched out one dainty gloved hand to pet the spotted neck.

"Take care," the painter cried, in a warning voice; "don't be frightened if he springs at you. He's vicious at times. But his fangs are drawn; he can't possibly hurt you."

The warning, however, was quite unnecessary. Sardanapalus, instead of springing, seemed to recognise a friend. He darted out his forked tongue in rapid vibration, and licked her neat grey glove respectfully. Then, lifting his flattened head with serpentine deliberation, he coiled his great folds slowly, slowly, with sinuous curves, round the girl's soft arm till he reached her neck in long, winding convolutions. There he held up his face, and trilled his swift, sibilant tongue once more with evident pleasure. He knew his place. He was perfectly at home at once with the pretty, olive-skinned lady. His master looked on in profound surprise.

"Why, you're a perfect snake-charmer," he cried at last, regarding her with open eyes of wonder. "I never saw Sardanapalus behave like that with a stranger before. He's generally by no means fond of new acquaintances. You must be used to snakes. Perhaps you've kept one? You're accustomed of old to their ways and manners?"

"No, indeed," Elma cried, laughing in spite of herself, a clear little laugh of feminine triumph; for she had made a conquest, she saw, of Sardanapalus; "I never so much as touched one in all my life before. And I thought I should hate them. But this one seems quite tame and tractable. I'm not in the least afraid of him. He is so soft and smooth, and his movements are all so perfectly gentle."

"Ah, that's the way with snakes, always," Cyril Waring put in, with an admiring glance at the pretty, fearless brunette and her strange companion. "They know at once whether people like them or not, and they govern themselves accordingly. I suppose it's instinct. When they see you're afraid of them, they spring and hiss; but when they see you take to them by nature, they make themselves perfectly at home in a moment. They don't wait to be asked. They've no false modesty. Well, then, you see," he went on, drawing imaginary lines with his ticket on the sketch he was holding up, "I shall work in Sardanapalus just there, like that, coiled round in a spire. You catch the idea, don't you?"

As he spoke, Elma's eye, following his hand while it moved, chanced to fall suddenly on the name of the station printed on the ticket with which he was pointing. She gave a sharp little start.

"Warnworth!" she cried, flushing up, with some slight embarrassment in her voice; "why, that's ever so far back. We're long past Warnworth. We ran by it three or four stations behind; in fact, it's the next place to Chetwood, where I got in at."

Cyril Waring looked up with a half-guilty smile as embarrassed as her own.

"Oh yes," he said quietly. "I knew that quite well. I'm down here often. It's half-way between Chetwood and Warnworth I'm painting. But I thought—well, if you'll excuse me saying it, I thought I was so comfortable and so happy where I was, that I might just as well go on a station or two more, and then pay the difference, and take the next train back to Warnworth. You see," he added, after a pause, with a still more apologetic and penitent air, "I saw you were so interested in—well, in snakes, you know, and pictures."

Gentle as he was, and courteous, and perfectly frank with her, Elma, nevertheless, felt really half inclined to be angry at this queer avowal. That is to say, at least, she knew it was her bounden duty, as an English lady, to seem so; and she seemed so accordingly with most Britannic severity. She drew herself up in a very stiff style, and stared fixedly at him, while she began slowly and steadily to uncoil Sardanapalus from her imprisoned arm with profound dignity.

"I'm sorry I should have brought you so far out of your way," she said, in a studied cold voice—though that was quite untrue, for, as a matter of fact, she had enjoyed their talk together immensely. "And besides, you've been wasting your valuable time when you ought to have been painting. You'll hardly get any work done now at all this morning. I must ask you to get out at the very next station."

The young man bowed with a crestfallen air. "No time could possibly be wasted," he began, with native politeness, "that was spent—" Then he broke off quite suddenly. "I shall certainly get out wherever you wish," he went on, more slowly, in an altered voice; "and I sincerely regret if I've unwittingly done anything to annoy you in any way. The fact is, the talk carried me away. It was art that misled me. I didn't mean, I'm sure, to obtrude myself upon you."

And even as he spoke they whisked, unawares, into the darkness of a tunnel.

CHAPTER II.
TWO'S COMPANY

Elma was just engaged in debating with herself internally how a young lady of perfect manners and impeccable breeding, travelling without a chaperon, ought to behave under such trying circumstances, after having allowed herself to be drawn unawares into familiar conversation with a most attractive young artist, when all of a sudden a rapid jerk of the carriage succeeded in extricating her perforce, and against her will, from this awkward dilemma. Something sharp pulled up their train unexpectedly. She was aware of a loud noise and a crash in front, almost instantaneously followed by a thrilling jar—a low dull thud—a sound of broken glass—a quick blank stoppage. Next instant she found herself flung wildly forward into her neighbour's arms, while the artist, for his part, with outstretched hands, was vainly endeavouring to break the force of the fall for her.

All she knew for the first few minutes was merely that there had been an accident to the train, and they were standing still now in the darkness of the tunnel.

For some seconds she paused, and gasped hard for breath, and tried in vain to recall her scattered senses. Then slowly she sank back on the seat once more, vaguely conscious that something terrible had happened to the train, but that neither she nor her companion were seriously injured.

As she sank back in her place, Cyril Waring bent forward towards her with sympathetic kindliness.

"You're not hurt, I hope," he said, holding out one hand to help her rise. "Stand up for a minute, and see if you're anything worse than severely shaken. No? That's right, then! That's well, as far as it goes. But I'm afraid the nervous shock must have been very rough on you."

Elma stood tip, with tears gathering fast in her eyes. She'd have given the world to be able to cry now, for the jar had half stunned her and shaken her brain; but before the artist's face she was ashamed to give free play to her feelings. So she only answered, in a careless sort of tone—

"Oh, it's nothing much, I think. My head feels rather queer; but I've no bones broken. A collision, I suppose. Oughtn't we to get out at once and see what's happened to the other people?"

Cyril Waring moved hastily to the door, and, letting down the window, tried with a violent effort to turn the handle from the outside. But the door wouldn't open. As often happens in such accidents, the jar had jammed it. He tried the other side, and with some difficulty at last succeeded in forcing it open. Then he descended cautiously on to the six-foot-way, and held out his hand to help Elma from the carriage.

It was no collision, he saw at once, but a far more curious and unusual accident.

Looking ahead through the tunnel, all was black as night. A dense wall of earth seemed to block and fill in the whole space in front of them. Part of one broken and shattered carriage lay tossed about in wild confusion on the ground close by. Their own had escaped. All the rest was darkness.

In a moment, Cyril rightly divined what must have happened to the train. The roof of the tunnel had caved in on top of it. At least one carriage—the one immediately in front of them—had been crushed and shattered by the force of its fall. Their own was the last, and it had been saved as if by a miracle. It lay just outside the scene of the subsidence.

One thought rose instinctively at once in the young man's mind. They must first see if any one was injured in the other compartments, or among the débris of the broken carriage; and then they must make for the open mouth of the tunnel, through which the light of day still gleamed bright behind them.

He peered in hastily at the other three windows. Not a soul in any one of the remaining compartments! It was a very empty train, he had noticed himself, when he had got in at Tilgate; the one solitary occupant of the front compartment of their carriage, a fat old lady with a big black bag,

had bundled out at Chetwood. They were alone in the tunnel—at this end of the train at least; their sole duty now was to make haste and save themselves.

He gazed overhead. The tunnel was bricked in with an arch on top. The way through in front was blocked, of course, by the fallen mass of water-logged sandstone. He glanced back towards the open mouth. A curious circumstance, half-way down to the opening, attracted at once his keen and practised eye.

Strange to say, the roof at one spot was not a true arc of a circle. It bulged slightly downwards, in a flattened arch, as if some superincumbent weight were pressing hard upon it. Great heavens, what was this? Another trouble in store! He looked again, still more earnestly, and started with horror.

In the twinkling of an eye, his reason told him, beyond the shadow of a doubt, what was happening at the bulge. A second fall was just about to take place close by them. Clearly there were TWO weak points m the roof of the tunnel. One had already given way in front; the other was on the very eve of giving way behind them. If it fell, they were imprisoned between two impassable walls of sand and earth. Without one instant's delay, he turned and seized his companion's hand hastily.

"Quick! quick!" he cried, in a voice of eager warning. "Run, run for your life to the mouth of the tunnel! Here, come! You've only just time! It's going, it's going!"

But Elma's feminine instinct worked quicker and truer than even Cyril Waring's manly reason. She didn't know why; she couldn't say how; but in that one indivisible moment of time she had taken in and grasped to the full all the varying terrors of the situation. Instead of running, however, she held back her companion with a nervous force she could never before have imagined herself capable of exerting.

"Stop here," she cried authoritatively, wrenching his arm in her haste. "If you go you'll be killed. There's no time to run past. It'll be down before you're there. See, see, it's falling."

Even before the words were well out of her mouth, another great crash shook the ground behind them. With a deafening roar, the tunnel gave way in a second place beyond. Dust and sand filled the air confusedly. For a minute or two all was noise and smoke and darkness. What exactly had happened neither of them could see. But now the mouth of the tunnel was blocked at either end alike, and no daylight was visible. So far as Cyril could judge, they two stood alone, in the dark and gloom, as in a narrow cell, shut in with their carriage between two solid walls of fallen earth and crumbling sandstone.

At this fresh misfortune, Elma sat down on the footboard with her face in her hands, and began to sob bitterly. The artist leaned over her and let her cry for a while in quiet despair. The poor girl's nerves, it was clear, were now wholly unstrung. She was brave, as women go, undoubtedly brave; but the shock and the terror of such a position as this were more than enough to terrify the bravest. At last Cyril ventured on a single remark.

"How lucky," he said, in an undertone, "I didn't get out at Warnworth after all. It would have been dreadful if you'd been left all alone in this position."

Elma glanced up at him with a sudden rush of gratitude. By the dim light of the oil lamp that still flickered feebly in the carriage overhead, she could see his face; and she knew by the look in those truthful eyes that he really meant it. He really meant he was glad he'd come on and exposed himself to this risk, which he might otherwise have avoided, because he would be sorry to think a helpless woman should be left alone by herself in the dark to face it. And, frightened as she was, she was glad of it too. To be alone would be awful. This was pre-eminently one of those many positions in life in which a woman prefers to have a man beside her.

And yet most men, she knew, would have thought to themselves at once, "What a fool I was to come on beyond my proper station, and let myself in for this beastly scrape, just because I'd go a few miles further with a pretty girl I never saw in my life before, and will probably never see in my life again, if I once get well out of this precious predicament."

But that they would ever get out of it at all seemed to both of them now in the highest degree improbable. Cyril, by reason, Elma, by instinct, argued out the whole situation at once, and correctly. There had been much rain lately. The sandstone was water-logged. It had caved in bodily, before them and behind them. A little isthmus of archway still held out in isolation just above their heads. At any moment that isthmus might give way too, and, falling on their carriage, might crush them beneath its weight. Their lives depended upon the continued resisting power of some fifteen yards or so of dislocated masonry.

Appalled at the thought, Cyril moved from his place for a minute, and went forward to examine the fallen block in front. Then he paced his way back with groping steps to the equally ruinous mass behind them. Elma's eyes, growing gradually accustomed to the darkness and the faint glimmer of the oil lamps, followed his action with vague and tearful interest.

"If the roof doesn't give way," he said calmly at last, when he returned once more to her, "and if we can only let them know we're alive in the tunnel, they may possibly dig us out before we choke. There's air enough here for eighteen hours for us."

He spoke very quietly and reassuringly, as if being shut up in a fallen tunnel between two masses of earth were a matter that needn't cause one the slightest uneasiness; but his words suggested to Elma's mind a fresh and hitherto unthought-of danger.

"Eighteen hours," she cried, horror-struck. "Do you mean to say we may have to stop here, all alone, for eighteen hours together? Oh, how very dreadful! How long! How frightening! And if they don't dig us out before eighteen hours are over, do you mean to say we shall die of choking?"

Cyril gazed down at her with a very regretful and sympathetic face.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said; "at least, not more than you're frightened already; but, of course, there's only a certain amount of oxygen in the space that's left us; and as we're using it up at every breath, it'll naturally hold out for a limited time only. It can't be much more than eighteen hours. Still, I don't doubt they'll begin digging us out at once; and if they dig through fast, they may yet be in time, even so, to save us."

Elma bent forward with her face in her hands again, and, rocking herself to and fro in an agony of despair, gave herself vip to a paroxysm of utter misery. This was too, too terrible. To think of eighteen hours in that gloom and suspense; and then to die at last, gasping hard for breath, in the poisonous air of that pestilential tunnel.

For nearly an hour she sat there, broken down and speechless; while Cyril Waring, taking a seat in silence by her side, tried at first with mute sympathy to comfort and console her. Then he turned to examine the roof, and the block at either end, to see if perchance any hope remained of opening by main force an exit anywhere. He even began by removing a little of the sand at the side of the line with a piece of shattered board from the broken carriage in front; but that was clearly no use. More sand tumbled in as fast as he removed it. He saw there was nothing left for it but patience or despair. And of the two, his own temperament dictated rather patience.

He returned at last, wearied out, to Elma's side. Elma, still sitting disconsolate on the footboard, rocking herself up and down, and moaning low and piteously, looked up as he came with a mute glance of inquiry. She was very pretty. That struck him even now. It made his heart bleed to think she should be so cowed and terrified.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, after a pause, half afraid to speak, "but there are four lamps all burning hard in these four compartments, and using up the air we may need by-and-by for our own breathing. If I were to climb to the top of the carriage—which I can easily do—I could put them all out, and economize our oxygen. It would leave us in the dark, but it'd give us one more chance of life. Don't you think I'd better get up and turn them off, or squash them?"

Elma clasped her hands in horror at the bare suggestion.

"Oh dear, no!" she cried hastily. "Please, PLEASE don't do that. It's bad enough to choke slowly, like this, in the gloom. But to die in the dark—that would be ten times more terrible. Why, it's a perfect Black Hole of Calcutta, even now. If you were to turn out the lights I could never stand it."

Cyril gave a respectful little nod of assent.

"Very well," he answered, as calm as ever. "That's just as you will. I only meant to suggest it to you. My one wish is to do the best I can for you. Perhaps"—and he hesitated—"perhaps I'd better let it go on for an hour or two more, and then, whenever the air begins to get very oppressive—I mean when one begins to feel it's really failing us—one person, you know, could live on so much longer than two… it would be a pity not to let you stand every chance. Perhaps I might–"

Elma gazed at him aghast in the utmost horror. She knew what he meant at once. She didn't even need that he should finish his sentence.

"Never!" she said, firmly clenching her small hand hard. "It's so wrong of you to think of it, even. I could never permit it. It's your duty to keep yourself alive at all hazards as long as ever you can. You should remember your mother, your sisters, your family."

"Why, that's just it," Cyril answered, a little crestfallen, and feeling he had done quite a wicked thing in venturing to suggest that his companion should have every chance for her own life. "I've got no mother, you see, no sisters, no family. Nobody on earth would ever be one penny the worse if *I* were to die, except my twin brother; he's the only relation I ever had in my life; and even HE, I dare say, would very soon get over it. Whereas YOU"—he paused and glanced at her compassionately —"there are probably many to whom the loss would be a very serious one. If I could do anything to save you–" He broke off suddenly, for Elma looked up at him once more with a little burst of despair.

"If you talk like that," she cried, with a familiarity that comes of association in a very great danger, "I don't know what I shall do; I don't know what I shall say to you. Why, I couldn't bear to be left alone here to die by myself. If only for MY sake, now we're boxed up here together, I think you ought to wait and do the best you can for yourself."

"Very well," Cyril answered once more, in a most obedient tone. "If you wish me to live to keep you company in the tunnel, I'll live while I may. You have only to say what you wish. I'm here to wait upon you."

In any other circumstances, such a phrase would have been a mere piece of conversational politeness. At that critical moment, Elma knew it for just what it was—a simple expression of his real feeling.

CHAPTER III.
CYRIL WARING'S BROTHER

It was nine o'clock that self-same night, and two men sat together in a comfortable sitting-room under the gabled roofs of Staple Inn, Holborn. It was as cosy a nook as any to be found within the four-mile radius, and artistic withal in its furniture and decorations.

In the biggest arm-chair by the empty grate, a young man with a flute paused for a moment, irresolute. He was a handsome young man, expressive eyes, and a neatly-cut brown beard—for all the world like Cyril Waring's. Indeed, if Elma Clifford could that moment have been transported from her gloomy prison in the Lavington tunnel to that cosy room at Staple Inn, Holborn, she would have started with surprise to find the young man who sat in the arm-chair was to all outer appearance the self-same person as the painter she had just left at the scene of the accident. For the two Warings were truly "as like as two peas"; a photograph of one might almost have done duty for the photograph of the other.

The other occupant of the room, who leaned carelessly against the mantelshelf, was taller and older; though he, too, was handsome, but with the somewhat cynical and unprepossessing handsomeness of a man of the world. His forehead was high; his lips were thin; his nose inclined toward the Roman pattern; his black moustache was carefully curled and twisted at the extremities. Moreover, he was musical; for he held in one hand the bow of a violin, having just laid down the instrument itself on the sofa after a plaintive duet with Guy Waring.

"Seen this evening's paper, by the way, Guy?" he asked, after a pause, in a voice that was all honeyed charm and seductiveness. "I brought the St. James's Gazette for you, but forgot to give you it; I was so full of this new piece of mine. Been an accident this morning, I see, on the Great Southern line. Somewhere down Cyril's way, too; he's painting near Chetwood; wonder whether he could possibly, by any chance, have been in it?"

He drew the paper carelessly from his pocket as he spoke, and handed it with a graceful air of inborn courtesy to his younger companion. Everything that Montague Nevitt did, indeed, was naturally graceful and courteous.

Guy Waring took the printed sheet from his hands without attaching much importance to his words, and glanced over it lightly.

"At ten o'clock this morning," the telegram said, "a singular catastrophe occurred in a portion of the Lavington tunnel on the Great Southern Railway. As the 9.15 way-train from Tilgate Junction to Guildford was passing through, a segment of the roof of the tunnel collapsed, under pressure of the dislocated rock on top, and bore down with enormous weight upon the carriages beneath it. The engine, tender, and four front waggons escaped unhurt; but the two hindmost, it is feared, were crushed by the falling mass of earth. It is not yet known how many passengers, if any, may have been occupying the wrecked compartments; but every effort is now being made to dig out the débris."

Guy read the paragraph through unmoved, to the outer eye, though with a whitening face, and then took up the dog-eared "Bradshaw" that lay close by upon the little oak writing-table. His hand trembled. One glance at the map, however, set his mind at rest.

"I thought so," he said quietly. "Cyril wouldn't be there. It's beyond his beat. Lavington's the fourth station this way on the up-line from Chetwood. Cyril's stopping at Tilgate town, you know—I heard from him on Saturday—and the bit he's now working at's in Chetwood Forest. He couldn't get lodgings at Chetwood itself, so he's put up for the present at the White Lion, at Tilgate, and runs over by train every day to Warnworth. It's three stations away—four off Lavington. He'd have been daubing for an hour in the wood by that time."

"Well, I didn't attach any great importance to it myself," Nevitt went on, unconcerned. "I thought most likely Cyril wouldn't be there. But still I felt you'd like, at any rate, to know about it."

"Oh, of course," Guy answered, still scanning the map in "Bradshaw" close. "He couldn't have been there; but one likes to know. I think, indeed, to make sure, I'll telegraph to Tilgate. Naturally, when a man's got only one relation in the whole wide world—without being a sentimentalist—that one relation means a good deal in life to him. And Cyril and I are more to one another, of course, than most ordinary brothers." He bit his thumb. "Still, I can't imagine how he could possibly be there," he went on, glancing at "Bradshaw" once more. "You see, if he went to work, he'd have got out at Warnworth; and if he meant to come to town to consult his dentist, he'd have taken the 9.30 express straight through from Tilgate, which gets up to London twenty-five minutes earlier."

"Well, but why to consult his dentist in particular?" Nevitt asked with a smile. He had very white teeth, and he smiled accordingly perhaps a little oftener than was quite inevitable. "You Warings are so absolute. I never knew any such fellows in my life as you are. You decide things so beforehand. Why mightn't he have been coming up to town, for example, to see a friend, or get himself fresh colours?"

"Oh, I said 'to consult his dentist,'" Guy answered, in the most matter-of-fact voice on earth, suppressing a tremor, "because you know I've had toothache off and on myself, one day with another, for the whole last fortnight. And it's a tooth that never ached with either of us before-this one, you see"—he lifted his lip with his forefinger—"the second on the left after the one we've lost. If Cyril was coming up to town at all, I'm pretty sure it'd be his tooth he was coming up to see about. I went to Eskell about mine myself last Wednesday."

The elder man seated himself and leaned back in his chair, with his violin in his lap; then he surveyed his friend long and curiously.

"It must be awfully odd, Guy," he said at last, after a good hard stare, "to lead such a queer sort of duplicate life as Cyril and you do! Just fancy being the counterfoil to some other man's cheque! Just fancy being bound to do, and think, and speak, and wish as he does! Just fancy having to get a toothache, in the very same tooth and on the very same day! Just fancy having to consult the identical dentist that he consults simultaneously! It'd drive ME mad. Why, it's clean rideeklous!"

Guy Waring looked up hastily from the telegraph form he was already filling in, and answered, with some warmth—

"No, no; not quite so. It isn't like that. You mistake the situation. We're both cheques equally, and neither is a counterfoil. Cyril and I depend for our characters, as everybody else does, upon our father and mother and our remoter progenitors. Only being twins, and twins cast in very much the same sort of mould, we're naturally the product of the same two parents, at the same precise point in their joint life history; and therefore we're practically all but identical."

As he rose from his desk, with the telegram in his hand, the porter appeared at the door with letters. Guy seized them at once, with some little impatience. The first was from Cyril. He tore it open in haste, and skimmed it through rapidly. Montague Nevitt meanwhile sat languid in his chair, striking a pensive note now and again on his violin, with his eyes half closed and his lips parted. Guy drew a sigh of relief as he skimmed his note.

"Just what I expected," he said slowly. "Cyril couldn't have been there. He writes last night—the letter's marked 'Delayed in transmission'; no doubt by the accident—'I shall come up to town on Friday or Saturday morning to see the dentist. One of my teeth is troublesome; I suppose you've had the same; the second on the left from the one we've lost; been aching a fortnight. I want it stopped. But to-morrow I really CAN'T leave work. I've got well into the swing of such a lovely bit of fern, with Sardanapalus just gleaming like gold in the foreground.' So that settles matters somewhat. He can't have been there. Though, I think, even so, I'll just telegraph for safety's sake and make things certain."

Nevitt struck a chord twice with a sweep of his hand, listened to it dreamily for a minute with far-away eyes, and then remarked once more, without even looking up, "The same tooth lost, he says?

You both had it drawn! And now another one aches in both of you alike! How very remarkable! How very, very curious!"

"Well, that WAS queer," Guy replied, relaxing into a smile, "queer even for us; I won't deny it; for it happened this way. I was over in Brussels at the time, as correspondent for the Sphere at the International Workmen's Congress, and Cyril was away by himself just then on his holiday in the Orkneys. We both got toothache in the self-same tooth on the self-same night; and we both lay awake for hours in misery. Early in the morning we each of us got up—five hundred miles away from one another, remember—and as soon as we were dressed *I* went into a dentist's in the Montagne de la Cour, and Cyril to a local doctor's at Larwick; and we each of us had it out, instanter. The dentists both declared they could save them if we wished; but we each preferred the loss of a tooth to another such night of abject misery."

Nevitt stroked his moustache with a reflective air. This was almost miraculous. "Well, I should think," he said at last, after close reflection, "where such sympathy as that exists between two brothers, if Cyril had really been hurt in this accident, you must surely in some way have been dimly conscious of it."

Guy Waring, standing there, telegram in hand, looked down at his companion with a somewhat contemptuous smile.

"Oh dear, no," he answered, with common-sense confidence; for he loved not mysteries. "You don't believe any nonsense of that sort, do you? There's nothing in the least mystical in the kind of sympathy that exists between Cyril and myself. It's all purely physical. We're very like one another. But that's all. There's none of the Corsican Brothers sort of hocus-pocus about us in any way. The whole thing is a simple caste of natural causation."

"Then you don't believe in brain-waves?" Nevitt suggested, with a gracefully appropriate undulation of his small white hand.

Guy laughed incredulously. "All rubbish, my dear fellow," he answered, "all utter rubbish. If any man knows, it's myself and Cyril. We're as near one another as any two men on earth could possibly be; but when we want to communicate our ideas, each to each, we have to speak or write, just like the rest of you. Every man is like a clock wound up to strike certain hours. Accidents may happen, events may intervene, the clock may get smashed, and all may be prevented. But, bar accidents, it'll strike all right, under ordinary circumstances, when the hour arrives for it. Well, Cyril and I, as I always say, are like two clocks wound up at the same time to strike together, and we strike with very unusual regularity. But that's the whole mystery. If *I* get smashed by accident, there's no reason on earth why Cyril shouldn't run on for years yet as usual; and if Cyril got smashed, there's no reason on earth why I should ever know anything about it except from the newspapers."

CHAPTER IV.
INSIDE THE TUNNEL

And, indeed, if brain-waves had been in question at all, they ought, without a doubt, to have informed Guy Waring that at the very moment when he was going out to send off his telegram, his brother Cyril was sitting disconsolate, with dark blue lips and swollen eyelids, on the footboard of the railway carriage in the Lavington tunnel. Cyril was worn out with digging by this time, for he had done his best once more to clear away the sand towards the front of the train in the vague hope that he might succeed in letting in a little more air to their narrow prison through the chinks and interstices of the fallen sandstone. Besides, a man in an emergency must do something, if only to justify his claim to manliness—especially when a lady is looking on at his efforts.

So Cyril Waring had toiled and moiled in that deadly atmosphere for some hours in vain, and now sat, wearied out and faint from foul vapours, by Elma's side on the damp, cold footboard. By this time the air had almost failed them. They gasped for breath, their heads swam vaguely. A terrible weight seemed to oppress their bosoms. Even the lamps in the carriages flickered low and burned blue. The atmosphere of the tunnel, loaded from the very beginning with sulphurous smoke, was now all but exhausted. Death stared them in the face without hope of respite—a ghastly, slow death by gradual stifling.

"You MUST take a little water," Elma murmured, pouring out the last few drops for him into the tin cup—for Cyril had brought a small bottleful that morning for his painting, as well as a packet of sandwiches for lunch. "You're dreadfully tired. I can see your lips are parched and dry with digging."

She was deathly pale herself, and her own eyes were livid, for by this time she had fairly given up all hope of rescue; and, besides, the air in the tunnel was so foul and stupefying, she could hardly speak; indeed, her tongue clung to her palate. But she poured out the last few drops into the cup for Cyril and held them up imploringly, with a gesture of supplication. These two were no strangers to one another now. They had begun to know each other well in those twelve long hours of deadly peril shared in common.

Cyril waved the cup aside with a firm air of dissent.

"No, no," he said, faintly, "you must drink it yourself. Your need is greater far than mine."

Elma tried to put it away in turn, but Cyril would not allow her. So she moistened her mouth with those scanty last drops, and turned towards him gratefully.

"There's no hope left now," she said, in a very resigned voice. "We must make up our minds to die where we stand. But I thank you, oh, I thank you so much, so earnestly."

Cyril, for his part, could hardly find breath to speak.

"Thank you," he gasped out, in one last despairing effort. "Things look very black; but while there's life there's hope. They may even still, perhaps, come up with us."

As he spoke, a sound broke unexpectedly on the silence of their prison. A dull thud seemed to make itself faintly heard from beyond the thick wall of sand that cut them off from the daylight. Cyril stared with surprise. It was a noise like a pick-axe. Stooping hastily down, he laid his ear against the rail beside the shattered carriage.

"They're digging!" he cried earnestly, finding words in his joy.

"They're digging to reach us! I can hear them! I can hear them!"

Elma glanced up at him with a certain tinge of half-incredulous surprise.

"Yes, they're digging, of course," she said quickly. "I knew they'd dig for us, naturally, as soon as they missed us. But how far off are they yet? That's the real question. Will they reach us in time? Are they near or distant?"

Cyril knelt down on the ground as before, in an agony of suspense, and struck the rail three times distinctly with his walking-stick. Then he put his ear to it and listened, and waited. In less than half a minute three answering knocks rang, dim but unmistakable, along the buried rail. He could even feel the vibration on the iron with his face.

"They hear us! They hear us!" he cried once more, in a tremor of excitement. "I don't think they're far off. They're coming rapidly towards us."

At the words Elma rose from her seat, still paler than ever, but strangely resolute, and took the stick from his hand with a gesture of despair. She was almost stifled. But she raised it with method. Knocking the rail twice, she bent down her head and listened in turn. Once more two answering knocks rang sharp along the connecting line of metal. Elma shook her head ominously.

"No, no, they're a very long way off still," she murmured, in a faltering tone. "I can hear it quite well. They can never reach us!"

She seated herself on a fragment of the broken carriage, and buried her face in her hands once more in silence. Her heart was full. Her head was very heavy. She gasped and struggled. Then a sudden intuition seized her, after her kind. If the rail could carry the sound of a tap, surely it might carry the human voice as well. Inspired with the idea, she rose again and leant forward.

A second time she knocked two quick little taps, ringing sharp on the rail, as if to bespeak attention; then, putting her mouth close to the metals, she shouted aloud along them with all the voice that was left her—

"Hallo, there, do you hear? Come soon, come fast. We're alive, but choking!"

Quick as lightning an answer rang back as if by magic, along the conducting line of the rail —a strange unexpected answer.

"Break the pipe of the wires," it said, and then subsided instantly.

Cyril, who was leaning down at her side at the moment with his ear to the rail, couldn't make out one word of it. But Elma's sharp senses, now quickened by the crisis, were acute as an Oriental's and keen as a beagle's.

"Break the pipe of the wires," they say, she exclaimed, starting back and pondering. "What on earth can they mean by that? What on earth can they be driving at? 'Break the pipe of the wires.' I don't understand them."

Hardly had she spoken, when another sharp tap resounded still more clearly along the rail at her feet. She bent down her head once more, and laid her eager ear beside it in terrible suspense. A rough man's voice—a navvy's, no doubt, or a fireman's—came speeding along the metal; and it said in thick accents—

"Do you hear what I say? If you want to breathe freer, break the pipe of the wires, and you'll get fresh air from outside right through it."

Cyril this time had caught the words, and jumped up with a sudden air of profound conviction. It was very dark, and the lamps were going out, but he took his fusee-box from his pocket and struck a light hastily. Sure enough, on the left-hand side of the tunnel, half buried in rubbish, an earthenware pipe ran along by the edge near the wall of the archway. Cyril raised his foot and brought his heel down upon it sharply with all the strength and force he had still left in him. The pipe broke short, and Cyril saw within it a number of telegraph wires for the railway service. The tube communicated directly with the air outside. They were saved! They were saved! Air would come through the pipe! He saw it all now! He dimly understood it!

At the self-same moment, another sound of breaking was heard more distinctly at the opposite end, some thirty or forty feet off through the tunnel. Then a voice rang far clearer, as if issuing from the tube, in short, sharp sentences—

"We'll pump you in air. How many of you are there? Are you all alive? Is any one injured?"

Cyril leant down and shouted back in reply—

"We're two. Both alive. Not hurt. But sick and half dead with stifling. Send us air as soon as ever you can. And if possible pass us a bottle of water."

Some minutes elapsed—three long, slow minutes of it—intense anxiety. Elma, now broken down with terror and want of oxygen, fell half fainting forward towards the shattered tube. Cyril held her up in his supporting arms, and watched the pipe eagerly. It seemed an age; but, after a time, he became conscious of a gust of air blowing cold on his face. The keen freshness revived him.

He looked about him and drew a deep breath. Cool air was streaming in through the broken place. Quick as thought, he laid Elma's mouth as close as he could lay it to the reviving current. Her eyes were closed. After a painful interval, she opened them languidly. Cyril chafed her hands with his, but his chafing seemed to produce very little effect. She lay motionless now with her eyelids half shut, and the whites of her eyes alone showing through them. The close, foul air of that damp and confined spot had worked its worst, and had almost asphyxiated her. Cyril began to fear the slight relief had arrived five minutes too late. And it must still in all probability be some hours at least before they could be actually disentombed from that living vault or restored to the open air of heaven.

As he bent over her and held his breath in speechless suspense, the voice called out again more loudly than ever—

"Look out for the ball in the tube. We're sending you water!"

Cyril watched the pipe closely and struck another light. In a minute, a big glass marble came rattling through, with a string attached to it.

"Pull the string!" the voice cried; and Cyril pulled with a will. Now and again, the object attached to it struck against some projecting ledge or angle where the pipes overlapped. But at last, with a little humouring, it came through in safety. At the end was a large india-rubber bottle, full of fresh water, and a flask of brandy. The young man seized them both with delight and avidity, and bathed Elma's temples over and over again with the refreshing spirit. Then he poured a little into the cup, and filling it up with water, held it to her lips with all a woman's tenderness. Elma gulped the draught down unconsciously, and opened her eyes at once. For a moment she stared about her with a wild stare of surprise.

Then, of a sudden, she recollected where she was, and why, and seizing Cyril's hand, pressed it long and eagerly.

"If only we can hold out for three hours more," she cried, with fresh hope returning, "I'm sure they'll reach us; I'm sure they'll reach us!"

CHAPTER V.
GRATITUDE

"There were only two of you, then, in the last carriage?" Guy asked with deep interest, the very next morning, as Cyril, none the worse for his long imprisonment, sat quietly in their joint chambers at Staple Inn, recounting the previous day's adventures.

"Yes. Only two of us. It was awfully fortunate. And the carriage that was smashed had nobody at all, except in the first compartment, which escaped being buried. So there were no lives lost, by a miracle, you may say. But several of the people in the front part of the train got terribly shaken."

"And you and the other man were shut up in the tunnel there for fifteen hours at a stretch?" Guy went on reflectively.

"At least fifteen hours," Cyril echoed, without attempting to correct the slight error of sex, for no man, he thought, is bound to criminate himself, even in a flirtation. "It was two in the morning before they dug us quite out. And my companion by that time was more dead than alive, I can tell you, with watching and terror."

"Was he, poor fellow?" Guy murmured, with a sympathetic face; for Cyril had always alluded casually to his fellow-traveller in such general terms that Guy was as yet unaware there was a lady in the case. "And is he all right again now, do you know? Have you heard anything more about him?"

But before Cyril could answer there came a knock at the door, and the next moment Mr. Montague Nevitt, without his violin, entered the room in some haste, all agog with excitement. His face was eager and his manner cordial. It was clear he was full of some important tidings.

"Why, Cyril, my dear fellow," he cried, grasping the painter's hand with much demonstration of friendly warmth, and wringing it hard two or three times over, "how delighted I am to see you restored to us alive and well once more. This is really too happy. What a marvellous escape! And what a romantic story! All the clubs are buzzing with it. A charming girl! You'll have to marry her, of course, that's the necessary climax. You and the young lady are the staple of news, I see, in very big print, in all the evening papers!"

Guy drew back at the words with a little start of surprise. "Young lady!" he cried aghast. "A charming girl, Nevitt! Then the person who was shut up with you for fifteen hours in the tunnel was a girl, Cyril!"

Cyril's handsome face flushed slightly before his brother's scrutinizing gaze; but he answered with a certain little ill-concealed embarrassment:

"Oh, I didn't say so, didn't I? Well, she WAS a girl then, of course; a certain Miss Clifford. She got in at Chetwood. Her people live somewhere down there near Tilgate. At least, so I gathered from what she told me."

Nevitt stared hard at the painter's eyes, which tried, without success, to look unconscious.

"A romance!" he said, slowly, scanning his man with deep interest. "A romance, I can see. Young, rich, and beautiful. My dear Cyril, I only wish I'd had half your luck. What a splendid chance, and what a magnificent introduction! Beauty in distress! A lady in trouble! You console her alone in a tunnel for fifteen hours by yourself at a stretch. Heavens, what a tete-a-tete! Did British propriety ever before allow a man such a glorious opportunity for chivalrous devotion to a lady of family, face, and fortune?"

"Was she pretty?" Guy asked, coming down at once to a more realistic platform.

Cyril hesitated a moment. "Well, yes," he answered, somewhat curtly, after a short pause. "She's distinctly good-looking." And he shut his mouth sharp. But he had said quite enough.

When a man says that of a girl, and nothing more, in an unconcerned voice, as if it didn't matter twopence to him, you may be perfectly sure in your own mind he's very deeply and seriously smitten.

"And young?" Guy continued.

"I should say about twenty."

"And rich beyond the utmost dreams of avarice?" Montague Nevitt put in, with a faintly cynical smile.

"Well, I don't know about that," Cyril answered truthfully. "I haven't the least idea who she is, even. She and I had other things to think about, you may be sure, boxed up there so long in that narrow space, and choking for want of air, than minute investigations into one another's pedigrees."

"WE'VE got no pedigree," Guy interposed, with a bitter smile. "So the less she investigates about that the better."

"But SHE has, I expect," Nevitt put in hastily; "and if I were you, Cyril, I'd hunt her up forthwith, while the iron's hot, and find out all there is to find out about her. Clifford-Clifford? I wonder whether by any chance she's one of the Devonshire Cliffords, now? For if so, she might really be worth a man's serious attention. They're very good business. They bank at our place; and they're by no means paupers." For Nevitt was a clerk in the well-known banking firm of Drummond, Coutts, and Barclay, Limited; and being a man who didn't mean, as he himself said, "to throw himself away on any girl for nothing," he kept a sharp look-out on the current account of every wealthy client with an only daughter.

Ten minutes later, as the talk ran on, some further light was unexpectedly thrown upon this interesting topic by the entrance of the porter with a letter for Cyril. The painter tore it open, and glanced over it, as Nevitt observed, with evident eagerness. It was short and curt, but in its own way courteous.

"'Mr. Reginald Clifford, C.M.G., desires to thank Mr. Cyril Waring for his kindness and consideration to Miss Clifford during her temporary incarceration–'

"Incarceration's good, isn't it? How much does he charge a thousand for that sort, I wonder?—

"'during her temporary incarceration in the Lavington tunnel yesterday. Mrs. and Miss Clifford wish also to express at the same time their deep gratitude to Mr. Waring for his friendly efforts, and trust he has experienced no further ill effects from the unfortunate accident to which he was subjected.

"'Craighton, Tilgate, Thursday morning.'"

"She MIGHT have written herself," Cyril murmured half aloud. He was evidently disappointed at this very short measure of correspondence on the subject.

But Montague Nevitt took a more cheerful view. "Oh, Reginald Clifford, of Craighton!" he cried with a smile, his invariable smile. "I know all about HIM. He's a friend of Colonel Kelmscott's down at Tilgate Park. C.M.G., indeed! What a ridiculous old peacock. He was administrator of St. Kitts once upon a time, I believe, or was it Nevis or Antigua? I don't quite recollect, I'm afraid; but anyhow, some comical little speck of a sugary, niggery, West Indian Island; and he was made a Companion of St. Michael and St. George when his term was up, just to keep him quiet, don't you know, for he wanted a knighthood, and to shelve him from being appointed to a first-class post like Barbados or Trinidad. If it's Elma Clifford you were shut up with in the tunnel, Cyril, you might do worse, there's no doubt, and you might do better. She's an only daughter, and there's a little money at the back of the family, I expect; but I fancy the Companion of the Fighting Saints lives mainly on his pension, which, of course, is purely personal, and so dies with him."

Cyril folded up the note without noticing Nevitt's words and put it in his pocket, somewhat carefully and obtrusively. "Thank you," he said, in a very quiet tone, "I didn't ask you about Miss Clifford's fortune. When I want information on that point I'll apply for it plainly. But meanwhile I don't think any lady's name should be dragged into conversation and bandied about like that, by an absolute stranger."

"Oh, now you needn't be huffy," Nevitt answered, with a still sweeter smile, showing all those pearly teeth of his to the greatest advantage. "I didn't mean to put your back up, and I'll tell you what I'll do for you. I'll heap coals of fire on your head, you ungrateful man. I'll return good for evil. You

shall have an invitation to Mrs. Holker's garden party on Saturday week at Chetwood Court, and there you'll be almost sure to meet the beautiful stranger."

But at that very moment, at Craighton, Tilgate, Mr. Reginald Clifford, C.M.G., a stiff little withered-up official Briton, half mummified by long exposure to tropical suns, was sitting in his drawing-room with Mrs. Clifford, his wife, and discussing—what subject of all others on earth but the personality of Cyril Waring?

"Well, it was an awkward situation for Elma, of course, I admit," he was chirping out cheerfully, with his back turned by pure force of habit to the empty grate, and his hands crossed behind him. "I don't deny it was an awkward situation. Still, there's no harm done, I hope and trust. Elma's happily not a fanciful or foolishly susceptible sort of girl. She sees it's a case for mere ordinary gratitude. And gratitude, in my opinion, towards a person in his position, is sufficiently expressed once for all by letter. There's no reason on earth she should ever again see or hear any more of him."

"But girls are so romantic," Mrs. Clifford put in doubtfully, with an anxious air. She herself was by no means romantic to look at, being, indeed, a person of a certain age, with a plump, matronly figure, and very staid of countenance; yet there was something in her eye, for all that, that recalled at times the vivid keenness of Elma's, and her cheek had once been as delicate and creamy a brown as her pretty daughter's. "Girls are so romantic," Mrs. Clifford repeated once more, in a dreamy way, "and she was evidently impressed by him."

"Well, I'm glad I made inquiries at once about these two young men, anyhow," the Companion of St. Michael and St. George responded with fervour, clasping his wizened little hands contentedly over his narrow waistcoat. "It's a precious odd story, and a doubtful story, and not at all the sort of story one likes one's girl to be any way mixed up with. For my part, I shall give them a very wide berth indeed in future; and there's no reason why Elma should ever knock up against them."

"Who told you they were nobodies?" Mrs. Clifford inquired, drawing a wistful sigh.

"Oh, Tom Clark was at school with them," the ex-administrator continued, with a very cunning air, "and he knows all about them—has heard the whole circumstances. Very odd, very odd; never met anything so queer in all my life; most mysterious and uncanny. They never had a father; they never had a mother; they never had anybody on earth they could call their own; they dropped from the clouds, as it were, one rainy day, without a friend in the world, plump down into the Charterhouse. There they were well supplied with money, and spent their holidays with a person at Brighton, who wasn't even supposed to be their lawful guardian. Looks fishy, doesn't it? Their names are Cyril and Guy Waring—and that's all they know of themselves. They were educated like gentlemen till they were twenty-one years old; and then they were turned loose upon the world, like a pair of young bears, with a couple of hundred pounds of capital apiece to shift for themselves with. Uncanny, very; I don't like the look of it. Not at all the sort of people an impressionable girl like our Elma should ever be allowed to see too much of."

"I don't think she was very much impressed by him," Mrs. Clifford said with confidence. "I've watched her to see, and I don't think she's in love with him. But by to-morrow, Reginald, I shall be able, I'm sure, to tell you for certain."

The Companion of the Militant Saints glanced rather uneasily across the hearth-rug at his wife. "It's a marvellous gift, to be sure, this intuition of yours, Louisa," he said, shaking his head sagely, and swaying himself gently to and fro on the stone kerb of the fender. "I frankly confess, my dear, I don't quite understand it. And Elma's got it too, every bit as bad as you have. Runs in the family, I suppose—runs somehow in the family. After living with you now for twenty-two years—yes, twenty-two last April—in every part of the world and every grade of the service, I'm compelled to admit that your intuition in these matters is really remarkable—simply remarkable."

Mrs. Clifford coloured through her olive-brown skin, exactly like Elma, and rose with a somewhat embarrassed and half-guilty air, avoiding her husband's eyes as if afraid to meet them.

Elma had gone to bed early, wearied out as she was with her long agony in the tunnel. Mrs. Clifford crept up to her daughter's room with a silent tread, like some noiseless Oriental, and, putting her ear to the keyhole, listened outside the door in profound suspense for several minutes.

Not a sound from within; not a gentle footfall on the carpeted floor. For a moment she hesitated; then she turned the handle slowly, and, peering before her, peeped into the room. Thank Heaven! no snake signs. Elma lay asleep, with one arm above her head, as peacefully as a child, after her terrible adventure. Her bosom heaved, but slowly and regularly. The mother drew a deep breath, and crept down the stairs with a palpitating heart to the drawing-room again.

"Reginald," she said, with perfect confidence, relapsing once more at a bound into the ordinary every-day British matron, "there's no harm done, I'm sure. She doesn't think of this young man at all. You may dismiss him from your mind at once and for ever. She's sleeping like a baby."

CHAPTER VI.
TWO STRANGE MEETINGS

"Mrs. Hugh Holker, at home, Saturday, May 29th, 3 to 6.30. Chetwood Court; tennis."

Cyril Waring read it out with a little thrill of triumph. To be sure, it was by no means certain that Elma would be there; but still, Chetwood Court was well within range of Tilgate town, and Montague Nevitt felt convinced, he said, the Holkers were friends of the Cliffords and the Kelmscotts.

"For my part," Guy remarked, balancing a fragment of fried sole on his fork as he spoke, "I'm not going all that way down to Chetwood merely to swell Mrs. Holker's triumph."

"I wouldn't if I were you," Cyril answered, with quiet incisiveness. He hadn't exactly fallen in love with Elma at first sight, but he was very much interested in her, and it struck him at once that what interested him was likely also to interest his twin brother. And this is just one of those rare cases in life where a man prefers that his interest in a subject should not be shared by any other person.

Before Saturday, the 29th, arrived, however, Guy had so far changed his mind in the matter, that he presented himself duly with Nevitt at Waterloo to catch the same train to Chetwood station that Cyril went down by.

"After all," he said to Nevitt, as they walked together from the club in Piccadilly, "I may as well see what the girl's like, anyhow. If she's got to be my sister-in-law—which seems not unlikely now—I'd better have a look at her beforehand, so to speak, on approbation."

The Holkers' grounds were large and well planted, with velvety lawns on the slope of a well-wooded hill overlooking the boundless blue weald of Surrey. Nevitt and the Warings were late to arrive, and found most of the guests already assembled before them.

After a time Guy found himself, to his intense chagrin, told off by his hostess to do the honours to an amiable old lady of high tonnage and great conversational powers, who rattled on uninterruptedly in one silvery stream about everybody on the ground, their histories and their pedigrees. She took the talking so completely off his hands, however, that, after a very few minutes, Guy, who was by nature of a lazy and contemplative disposition, had almost ceased to trouble himself about what she said, interposing "indeeds" and "reallys" with automatic politeness at measured intervals; when suddenly the old lady, coming upon a bench where a mother and daughter were seated in the shade, settled down by their sides in a fervour of welcome, and shook hands with them both effusively in a most demonstrative fashion.

The daughter was pretty—yes, distinctly pretty. She attracted Guy's attention at once by the piercing keenness of her lustrous dark eyes, and the delicate olive-brown of her transparent complexion. Her expression was merry, but with a strange and attractive undertone, he thought, of some mysterious charm. A more taking girl, indeed, now he came to look close, he hadn't seen for months. He congratulated himself on his garrulous old lady's choice of a bench to sit upon, if it helped him to an introduction to the beautiful stranger.

But before he could even be introduced, the pretty girl with the olive-brown complexion had held out her hand to him frankly, and exclaimed in a voice as sunny as her face—

"I don't need to be told your friend's name, I'm sure, Mrs. Godfrey. He's so awfully like him. I should have known him anywhere. Of course, you're Mr. Waring's brother, aren't you?"

Guy smiled, and bowed gracefully; he was always graceful.

"I refuse to be merely MR. WARING'S BROTHER," he answered, with some amusement, as he took the proffered hand in his own warmly. "If it comes to that, I'm Mr. Waring myself; and Cyril, whom you seem to know already, is only my brother."

"Ah, but MY Mr. Waring isn't here to-day, is he?" the olive-brown girl put in, looking around with quite an eager interest at the crowd in the distance. "Naturally, to me, he's THE Mr. Waring, of course, and you are only MY Mr. Waring's brother."

"Elma, my dear, what on earth will Mr. Waring think of you?" her mother put in, with the conventional shocked face of British propriety. "You know," she went on, turning round quickly to Guy, "we're all so grateful to your brother for his kindness to our girl in that dreadful accident the other day at Lavington, that we can't help thinking and talking of him all the time as our Mr. Waring. I'm sorry he isn't here himself this afternoon to receive our thanks. It would be such a pleasure to all of us to give them to him in person."

"Oh, he is about, somewhere," Guy answered carelessly, still keeping his eye fixed hard on the pretty girl. "I'll fetch him round by-and-by to pay his respects in due form. He'll be only too glad. And this, I suppose, must be Miss Clifford that I've heard so much about."

As he said those words, a little gleam of pleasure shot through Elma's eyes. Her painter hadn't forgotten her, then. He had talked much about her.

"Yes, I knew who you must be the very first moment I saw you," she answered, blushing; "you're so much like him in some ways, though not in all…. And he told me that day he had a twin brother."

"So much like him in some ways," Guy repeated, much amused. "Why, I wonder you don't take me for Cyril himself at once. You're the very first person I ever knew in my life, except a few old and very intimate friends, who could tell at all the difference between us."

Elma drew back, almost as if shocked and hurt at the bare suggestion.

"Oh, dear no," she cried quickly, scanning him over at once with those piercing keen eyes of hers; "you're like him, of course—I don't deny the likeness—as brothers may be like one another. Your features are the same, and the colour of your hair and eyes, and all that sort of thing; but still, I knew at a glance you weren't my Mr. Waring. I could never mistake you for him. The expression and the look are so utterly different."

"You must be a very subtle judge of faces," the young man answered, still smiling, "if you knew us apart at first sight; for I never before in my life met anybody who'd seen my brother once or twice, and who didn't take me for him, or him for me, the very first time he saw us apart. But then," he added, after a short pause, with a quick dart of his eyes, "you were with him in the tunnel for a whole long day; and in that time, of course, you saw a good deal of him."

Elma blushed again, and Guy noticed in passing that she blushed very prettily.

"And how's Sardanapalus?" she asked, in a somewhat hurried voice, making an inartistic attempt to change the subject.

"Oh, Sardanapalus is all right," Guy answered, laughing. "Cyril told me you had made friends with him, and weren't one bit afraid of him. Most people are so dreadfully frightened of the poor old creature."

"But he isn't old," Elma exclaimed, interrupting him with some warmth. "He's in the prime of life. He's so glossy and beautiful. I quite fell in love with him."

"And who is Sardanapalus?" Mrs. Clifford asked, with a vague maternal sense of discomfort and doubt. "A dog or a monkey?"

"Oh, Sardanapalus, mother—didn't I tell you about him?" Elma cried enthusiastically. "Why, he's just lovely and beautiful. He's such a glorious green and yellow-banded snake; and he coiled around my arm as if he'd always known me."

Mrs. Clifford drew back with a horror-stricken face, darting across at her daughter the same stealthy sort of look she had given her husband the night after Elma's adventure.

"A snake!" she repeated, aghast, "a snake! Oh, Elma! Why, you never told me that. And he coiled round your arm. How horrible!"

But Elma wasn't to be put down by exclamations of horror.

"Why, you're not afraid of snakes yourself, you know, mother," she went on, undismayed. "I remember papa saying that when you were at St. Kitts with him you never minded them a bit, but caught them in your hands like an Indian juggler, and treated them as playthings, so I wasn't afraid either. I suppose it's hereditary."

Mrs. Clifford gazed at her fixedly for a few seconds with a very pale face.

"I suppose it is," she said slowly and stiffly, with an evident effort. "Most things are, in fact, in this world we live in. But I didn't know YOU at least had inherited it, Elma."

Just at that moment they were relieved from the temporary embarrassment which the mention of Sardanapalus seemed to have caused the party, by the approach of a tall and very handsome man, who came forward with a smile towards where their group was standing. He was military in bearing, and had dark brown hair, with a white moustache; but he hardly looked more than fifty for all that, as Guy judged at once from his erect carriage and the singular youthfulness of both face and figure. That he was a born aristocrat one could see in every motion of his well-built limbs. His mien had that ineffable air of grace and breeding which sometimes marks the members of our old English families. Very much like Cyril, too, Guy thought to himself, in a flash of intuition; very much like Cyril, the way he raised his hat and then smiled urbanely on Mrs. Clifford and Elma. But it was Cyril grown old and prematurely white, and filled full with the grave haughtiness of an honoured aristocrat.

"Why, here's Colonel Kelmscott!" Mrs. Clifford exclaimed, with a sigh of relief, not a little set at ease by the timely diversion. "We're so glad you've come, Colonel. And Lady Emily too; she's over yonder, is she? Ah, well, I'll look out for her. We heard you were to be here. Oh, how kind of you; thank you. No, Elma's none the worse for her adventure, thank Heaven! just a little shaken, that's all, but not otherwise injured. And this gentleman's the brother of the kind friend who was so good to her in the tunnel. I'm not quite sure of the name. I think it's–"

"Guy Waring," the young man interposed blandly. Hardly any one who looked at Colonel Kelmscott's eyes could even have perceived the profound surprise this announcement caused him. He bowed without moving a muscle of that military face. Guy himself never noticed the intense emotion the introduction aroused in the distinguished stranger. But Mrs. Clifford and Elma, each scanning him closely with those keen grey eyes of theirs, observed at once that, unmoved as he appeared, a thunderbolt falling at Colonel Kelmscott's feet could not more thoroughly or completely have stunned him. For a second or two he gazed in the young man's face uneasily, his colour came and went, his bosom heaved in silence; then he roped his moustache with his trembling fingers, and tried in vain to pump up some harmless remark appropriate to the occasion. But no remark came to him. Mrs. Clifford darted a furtive glance at Elma, and Elma darted back a furtive glance at Mrs. Clifford. Neither said a word, and each let her eyes drop to the ground at once as they met the other's. But each knew in her heart that something passing strange had astonished Colonel Kelmscott; and each knew, too, that the other had observed it.

Mother and daughter, indeed, needed no spoken words to tell these things plainly to one another. The deep intuition that descended to both was enough to put them in sympathy at once without the need of articulate language.

"Yes, Mr. Guy Waring," Mrs. Clifford repeated at last, breaking the awkward silence that supervened upon the group. "The brother of Mr. Cyril Waring, who was so kind the other day to my daughter in the tunnel."

The Colonel started imperceptibly to the naked eye again.

"Oh, indeed," he said, forcing himself with an effort to speak at last. "I've read about it, of course; it was in all the papers…. And—eh—is your brother here, too, this afternoon, Mr. Waring?"

CHAPTER VII.
KELMSCOTT OF TILGATE

To both Elma and her mother this meeting between Colonel Kelmscott and Guy Waring was full of mystery. For the Kelmscotts, of Tilgate Park, were the oldest county family in all that part of Surrey; and Colonel Kelmscott himself passed as the proudest man of that haughtiest house in Southern England. What, therefore, could have made him give so curious and almost imperceptible a start the moment Guy Waring's name was mentioned in conversation? Not a word that he said, to be sure, implied to Guy himself the depth of his surprise; but Elma, with her marvellous insight, could see at once, for all that, by the very haze in his eyes, that he was fascinated by Guy's personality, somewhat as she herself had been fascinated the other day in the train by Sardanapalus. Nay, more; he seemed to wish, with all his heart, to leave the young man's presence, and yet to be glued to the spot, in spite of himself, by some strange compulsion.

It was with a dreamy, far-away tone in his voice that the Colonel uttered those seemingly simple words, "And is your brother here, too, this afternoon, Mr. Waring?"

"Yes, he's somewhere about," Guy answered carelessly. "He'll turn up by-and-by, no doubt. He's pretty sure to find out, sooner or later, Miss Clifford's here, and then he'll come round this way to speak to her."

For some time they stood talking in a little group by the bench, Colonel Kelmscott meanwhile thawing by degrees and growing gradually interested in what Guy had to say, while Elma looked on with a devouring curiosity.

"Your brother's a painter, you say," the Colonel murmured once under that heavy white moustache of his; "yes, I think I remember. A rising painter. Had a capital landscape in the Grosvenor last year, I recollect, and another in the Academy this spring, if I don't mistake—skied—skied, unfairly; yet a very pretty thing, too; 'At the Home of the Curlews.'"

"He's painting a sweet one now," Elma put in quickly, "down here, close by, in Chetwood Forest. He told me about it; it must be simply lovely—all fern and mosses, with, oh! such a beautiful big snake in the foreground."

"I should like to see it," Colonel Kelmscott said slowly, not without a pang. "If it's painted in the forest—and by your brother, Mr. Waring—that would give it, to me, a certain personal value." He paused a moment; then he added, in a little explanatory undertone, "I'm lord of the manor, you know, at Chetwood; and I shoot the forest."

"Cyril would be delighted to let you see the piece when it's finished," Guy answered lightly. "If you're ever up in town our way—we've rooms in Staple Inn. I dare say you know it—that quaint, old-fashioned looking place, with big lattice windows, that overhangs Holborn."

Colonel Kelmscott started, and drew himself up still taller and stiffer than before.

"I may have some opportunity of seeing it some day in one of the galleries," he answered coldly, as if not to commit himself. "To tell you the truth, I seldom have time to lounge about in studios. It was merely the coincidence of the picture being painted in Chetwood Forest that made me fancy for a moment I might like to see it. But I'm no connoisseur. Mrs. Clifford, may I take you to get a cup of tea? Tea, I think, is laid out in the tent behind the shrubbery."

It was said in a tone to dismiss Guy politely; and Guy, taking the hint, accepted it as such, and fell back a pace or two to his garrulous old lady. But before Colonel Kelmscott could walk off Mrs. Clifford and her daughter to the marquee for refreshments, Elma gave a sudden start, and blushed faintly pink through that olive-brown skin of hers.

"Why, there's MY Mr. Waring!" she exclaimed, in a very pleased tone, holding out her hand, with a delicious smile; and as she said it, Cyril and Montague Nevitt strolled up from behind a great clump of lilacs beside them.

Two pairs of eyes watched those young folks closely as they shook hands once more—Guy's and Mrs. Clifford's. Guy observed that a little red spot rose on Cyril's cheek he had rarely seen there, and that his voice trembled slightly as he said, "How do you do?" to his pretty fellow-traveller of the famous adventure. Mrs. Clifford observed that the faint pink faded out of the olive-brown skin as Elma took Cyril Waring's hand in hers, and that her face grew pale for three minutes afterwards. And Colonel Kelmscott, looking on with a quietly observant eye, remarked to himself that Cyril Waring was a very creditable young man indeed, as handsome as Guy, and as like as two peas, but if anything perhaps even a trifle more pleasing.

For the rest of that afternoon, they six kept constantly together.

Elma noted that Colonel Kelmscott was evidently ill at ease; a thing most unusual with that proud, self-reliant aristocrat. He held himself, to be sure, as straight and erect as ever, and moved about the grounds with that same haughty air of perfect supremacy, as of one who was monarch of all he surveyed in the county of Surrey. But Elma could see, for all that, that he was absent-minded and self-contained; he answered all questions in a distant, unthinking way; some inner trouble was undoubtedly consuming him. His eyes were all for the two Warings. They glanced nervously right and left every minute in haste, but returned after each excursion straight to Guy and Cyril. The Colonel noted narrowly all they said and did; and Elma was sure he was very much pleased at least with her painter. How could he fail to be, indeed?—for Mr. Waring was charming. Elma wished she could have strolled off with him about the lawn alone, were it only ten paces in front of her mother. But somehow the fates that day were unpropitious. The party held together as by some magnetic bond, and Mrs. Clifford's eye never for one moment deserted her.

The Colonel glowered. The Colonel was moody. His speech was curt. He occupied himself mainly in listening to Guy and Cyril. A sort of mesmeric influence seemed to draw him towards the two young men.

He drew them out deliberately. Yet the start he had given as either young man came up towards his side was a start, not of mere neutral surprise, but of positive disinclination and regret at the meeting. Nay, even now he was angling hard, with all the skill of a strategist, to keep the Warings out of Lady Emily's way. But the more he talked to them, the more interested he seemed. It was clear he meant to make the most of this passing chance—and never again, if he could help it, Elma felt certain, to see them.

Once, and once only, Granville Kelmscott, his son, strolled casually up and joined the group by pure chance for a few short minutes. The heir of Tilgate Park was tall and handsome, though less so than his father; and Mrs. Clifford was not wholly indisposed to throw him and Elma together as much as possible. Younger by a full year than the two Warings, Granville Kelmscott was not wholly unlike them in face and manner. As a rule, his father was proud of him, with a passing great pride, as he was proud of every other Kelmscott possession. But to-day, Elma's keen eye observed that the Colonel's glance moved quickly in a rapid dart from Cyril and Guy to his son Granville, and back again from his son Granville to Guy and Cyril. What was odder still, the hasty comparison seemed to redound not altogether to Granville's credit. The Colonel paused, and stifled a sigh as he looked; then, in spite of Mrs. Clifford's profound attempts to retain the heir by her side, he sent the young man off at a moment's notice to hunt up Lady Emily. Now why on earth did he want to keep Granville and the Warings apart? Mrs. Clifford and Elina racked their brains in vain; they could make nothing of the mystery.

It was a long afternoon, and Elma enjoyed it, though she never got her tete-a-tete after all with Cyril Waring. Just a rapid look, a dart from the eyes, a faint pressure of her hand at parting—that was all the romance she was able to extract from it, so closely did Mrs. Clifford play her part as chaperon.

But as the two young men and Montague Nevitt hurried off at last to catch their train back to town, the Colonel turned to Mrs. Clifford with a sigh of relief.

"Splendid young fellows, those," he exclaimed, looking after them. "I'm not sorry I met them. Ought to have gone into a cavalry regiment early in life; what fine leaders they'd have made, to be sure, in a dash for the guns or a charge against a battery! But they seem to have done well for themselves in their own way: carved out their own fortunes, each after his fashion. Very plucky young fellows. One of them's a painter, and one's a journalist; and both of them are making their mark in their own world. I really admire them."

And on the way to the station, that moment, Mr. Montague Nevitt, as he lit his cigarette, was saying to Cyril, with an approving smile, "Your Miss Clifford's pretty."

"Yes," Cyril answered drily, "she's not bad looking. She looked her best to-day. And she's capital company."

But Guy broke out unabashed into a sudden burst of speech.

"Not bad looking!" he cried contemptuously. "Is that all you have to say of her? And you a painter, too! Why, she's beautiful! She's charming! If Cyril was shut up in a tunnel with HER–"

He broke off suddenly.

And for the rest of the way home he spoke but seldom. It was all too true. The two Warings were cast in the self-same mould. What attracted one, it was clear, no less surely and certainly attracted the other.

As they went to their separate rooms in Staple Inn that night, Guy paused for a moment, candle in hand, by his door, and looked straight at Cyril.

"You needn't fear ME," he said, in a very low tone. "She's yours. You found her. I wouldn't be mean enough for a minute to interfere with your find. But I'm not surprised at you. I would do the same myself, if I could have seen her first. I won't see her again. I couldn't stand it. She's too beautiful to see and not to fall in love with."

CHAPTER VIII.
ELMA BREAKS OUT

Mrs. Clifford returned from Chetwood Court that clay in by no means such high spirits as when she went there. In the first place, she hadn't succeeded in throwing Elma and Granville Kelmscott into one another's company at all, and in the second place Elma had talked much under her very nose, for half-an-hour at a stretch, with the unknown young painter fellow. When Elma was asked out anywhere else in the country for the next six weeks or so, Mrs. Clifford made up her mind strictly to inquire in private, before committing herself to an acceptance, whether that dangerous young man was likely or not to be included in the party.

For Mrs. Clifford admitted frankly to herself that Cyril was dangerous; as dangerous as they make them. He was just the right age; he was handsome, he was clever, his tawny brown beard had the faintest little touch of artistic redness, and was trimmed and dressed with provoking nicety. He was an artist too; and girls nowadays, you know, have such an unaccountable way of falling in love with men who can paint, or write verses, or play the violin, or do something foolish of that sort, instead of sticking fast to the solid attractions of the London Stock Exchange or of ancestral acres.

Mrs. Clifford confided her fears that very night to the sympathetic ear of the Companion of the Militant and Guardian Saints of the British Empire.

"Reginald," she said solemnly, "I told you the other day, when you asked about it, Elma wasn't in love. And at the time I was right, or very near it. But this afternoon I've had an opportunity of watching them both together, and I've half changed my mind. Elma thinks a great deal too much altogether, I'm afraid, about this young Mr. Waring."

"How do you know?" Mr. Clifford asked, staring her hard in the face, and nodding solemnly.

The British matron hesitated. "How do I know anything?" she answered at last, driven to bay by the question. "I never know how. I only know I know it. But whatever we do we must be careful not to let Elma and the young man get thrown together again. I should say myself it wouldn't be a bad plan if we were to send her away somewhere for the rest of the summer, but I can tell you better about all this to-morrow."

Elma, for her part, had come home from Chetwood Court more full than ever of Cyril Waring. He looked so handsome and so manly that afternoon at the Holkers'. Elma hoped she'd be asked out where he was going to be again.

She sat long in her own bedroom, thinking it over with herself, while the candle burnt down in its socket very low, and the house was still, and the rain pattered hard on the roof overhead, and her father and mother were discussing her by themselves downstairs in the drawing-room.

She sat long on her chair without caring to begin undressing. She sat and mused with her hands crossed on her lap. She sat and thought, and her thoughts were all about Cyril Waring.

For more than an hour she sat there dreamily, and told herself over, one by one, in long order, the afternoon's events from beginning to the end of them. She repeated every word Cyril had spoken in her ear. She remembered every glance, every look he had darted at her. She thought of that faint pressure of his hand as he said farewell. The tender blush came back to her brown cheek once more with maidenly shame as she told it all over. He was so handsome and so nice, and so very, very kind, and, perhaps, after this, she might never again meet him. Her bosom heaved. She was conscious of a new sense just aroused within her.

Presently her heart began to beat more violently. She didn't know why. It had never beaten in her life like that before—not even in the tunnel, nor yet when Cyril came up to-day and spoke first to her. Slowly, slowly, she rose from her seat. The fit was upon her. Could this be a dream? Some strange impulse made her glide forward and stand for a minute or two irresolute, in the middle of the

room. Then she turned round, once, twice, thrice, half unconsciously. She turned round, wondering to herself all the while what this strange thing could mean; faster, faster, faster, her heart within her beating at each turn with more frantic haste and speed than ever. For some minutes she turned, glowing with red shame, yet unable to stop, and still more unable to say to herself why or wherefore.

At first that was all. She merely turned and panted. But as she whirled and whirled, new moods and figures seemed to force themselves upon her. She lifted her hands and swayed them about above her head gracefully. She was posturing she knew, but why she had no idea. It all came upon her as suddenly and as uncontrollably as a blush. She was whirling around the room, now slow, now fast, but always with her arms held out lissom, like a dancing-girl's. Sometimes her body bent this way, and sometimes that, her hands keeping time to her movements meanwhile in long graceful curves, but all as if compelled by some extrinsic necessity.

It was an instinct within her over which she had no control. Surely, surely, she must be possessed. A spirit that was not her seemed to be catching her round the waist, and twisting her about, and making her spin headlong over the floor through this wild fierce dance. It was terrible, terrible. Yet she could not prevent it. A force not her own seemed to sustain and impel her.

And all the time, as she whirled, she was conscious also of some strange dim need. A sense of discomfort oppressed her arms. She hadn't everything she required for this solitary orgy. Something more was lacking her. Something essential, vital. But what on earth it could be she knew not; she knew not.

By-and-by she paused, and, as she glanced right and left, the sense of discomfort grew clearer and more vivid. It was her hands that were wrong. Her hands were empty. She must have something to fill them. Something alive, lithe, curling, sinuous. These wavings and swayings, to this side and to that, seemed so meaningless and void—without some life to guide them. There was nothing for her to hold; nothing to tame and subdue; nothing to cling and writhe and give point to her movements. Oh! heavens, how horrible!

She drew herself up suddenly, and by dint of a fierce brief effort of will repressed for awhile the mad dance that overmastered her. The spirit within her, if spirit it were, kept quiet for a moment, awed and subdued by her proud determination. Then it began once more and led her resistlessly forward. She moved over to the chest of drawers still rhythmically and with set steps, but to the phantom strain of some unheard low music. The music was running vaguely through her head all the time—wild Aeolian music—it sounded like a rude tune on a harp or zither. And surely the cymbals clashed now and again overhead; and the timbrel rang clear; and the castanets tinkled, keeping time with the measure. She stood still and listened. No, no, not a sound save the rain on the roof. It was the music of her own heart, beating irregularly and fiercely to an intermittent lilt, like a Hungarian waltz or a Roumanian tarantella.

By this time, Elina was thoroughly frightened. Was she going mad? she asked herself, or had some evil spirit taken up his abode within her? What made her spin and twirl about like this—irresponsibly, unintentionally, irrepressibly, meaninglessly? Oh, what would her mother say, if only she knew all? And what on earth would Cyril Waring think of her?

Cyril Waring! Cyril Waring! It was all Cyril Waring. And yet, if he knew—oh, mercy, mercy!

Still, in spite of these doubts, misgivings, fears, she walked over towards the chest of drawers with a firm and rhythmical tread, to the bars of the internal music that rang loud through her brain, and began opening one drawer after another in an aimless fashion. She was looking for something—she didn't know what; and she never could rest now until she'd found it.

Drawer upon drawer she opened and shut wearily, but nothing that her eyes fell upon seemed to suit her mood. Dresses and jackets and underlinen were there; she glanced at them all with a deep sense of profound contempt; none of these gewgaws of civilized life could be of any use to supply the vague want her soul felt so dimly and yet so acutely. They were dead, dead, dead, so close and clinging! Go further! Go further! At last she opened the bottom drawer of all, and her eye fell askance

upon a feather boa, curled up at the bottom—soft, smooth, and long; a winding, coiling, serpentine boa. In a second, she had fallen upon it bodily with greedy hands, and was twisting it round her waist, and holding it high and low, and fighting fiercely at times, and figuring with it like a posturant. Some dormant impulse of her race seemed to stir in her blood, with frantic leaps and bounds, at its first conscious awakening. She gave herself up to it wildly now. She was mad. She was mad. She was glad. She was happy.

Then she began to turn round again, slowly, slowly, slowly. As she turned, she raised the boa now high above her head; now held it low on one side, now stooped down and caressed it. At times, as she played with it, the lifeless thing seemed to glide from her grasp in curling folds and elude her; at others, she caught it round the neck like a snake, and twisted it about her arm, or let it twine and encircle her writhing body. Like a snake! like a snake! That idea ran like wildfire through her burning veins. It was a snake, indeed, she wanted; a real live snake; what would she not have given, if it were only Sardanapalus!

Sardanapalus, so glossy, so beautiful, so supple, that glorious green serpent, with his large smooth coils, and his silvery scales, and his darting red tongue, and his long lithe movements. Sardanapalus, Sardanapalus, Sardanapalus! The very name seemed to link itself with the music in her head. It coursed with her blood. It rang through her brain. And another as well. Cyril Waring, Cyril Waring, Cyril Waring, Cyril Waring! Oh! great heavens, what would Cyril Waring say now, if only he could see her in her mad mood that moment!

And yet it was not she, not she, not she, but some spirit, some weird, some unseen power within her. It was no more she than that boa there was a snake. A real live snake. Oh, for a real live snake! And then she could dance—tarantel, tarantella—as the spirit within her prompted her to dance it.

"Faster, faster," said the spirit; and she answered him back, "Faster!"

Faster, faster, faster, faster she whirled round the room; the boa grew alive; it coiled about her; it strangled her. Her candle failed; the wick in the socket flickered and died; but Elma danced on, unheeding, in the darkness. Dance, dance, dance, dance; never mind for the light! Oh! what madness was this? What insanity had come over her? Would her feet never stop? Must she go on till she dropped? Must she go on for ever?

Ashamed and terrified with her maidenly sense, overawed and obscured by this hateful charm, yet unable to stay herself, unable to resist it, in a transport of fear and remorse, she danced on irresponsibly. Check herself she couldn't, let her do what she would. Her whole being seemed to go forth into that weird, wild dance. She trembled and shook. She stood aghast at her own shame. She had hard work to restrain herself from crying aloud in her horror.

At last, a lull, a stillness, a recess. Her limbs seemed to yield and give way beneath her. She half fainted with fatigue. She staggered and fell. Too weary to undress, she flung herself upon the bed, just as she was, clothes and all. Her overwrought nerves lost consciousness at once. In three minutes she was asleep, breathing fast but peacefully.

CHAPTER IX.
AND AFTER?

When Elma woke up next morning, it was broad daylight. She woke with a start, to find herself lying upon the bed where she had flung herself. For a minute or two she couldn't recollect or recall to herself how it had all come about. It was too remote from anything in her previous waking thought, too dream-like, too impossible. Then an unspeakable horror flashed over her unawares. Her face flushed hot. Shame and terror overcame her. She buried her head in her hands in an agony of awe. Her own self-respect was literally outraged. It wasn't exactly remorse; it wasn't exactly fear; it was a strange creeping feeling of ineffable disgust and incredulous astonishment.

There could be but one explanation of this impossible episode. She must have gone mad all at once! She must be a frantic lunatic!

A single thought usurped her whole soul. If she was going mad—if this was really mania—she could never, never, never—marry Cyril Waring.

For in a flash of intuition she knew that now. She knew she was in love. She knew he loved her.

In that wild moment of awakening all the rest mattered nothing. The solitary idea that ran now through her head, as the impulse to dance had run through it last night, was the idea that she could never marry Cyril Waring. And if Cyril Waring could have seen her just then! her cheeks burned yet a brighter scarlet at that thought than even before. One virginal blush suffused her face from chin to forehead. The maidenly sense of shame consumed and devoured her.

Was she mad? Was she mad? And was this a lucid interval?

Presently, as she lay still on her bed all dressed, and with her face in her hands, trembling for very shame, a little knock sounded tentatively at the door of her bedroom. It was a timid, small knock, very low and soft, and, as it were, inquiring. It seemed to say in an apologetic sort of undertone, "I don't know whether you're awake or not just yet; and if you're still asleep, pray don't let me for a moment disturb or arouse you."

"Who's there?" Elma mustered up courage to ask, in a hushed voice of terror, hiding her head under the bed-clothes.

"It's me, darling," Mrs. Clifford answered, very softly and sweetly. Elma had never heard her mother speak in so tender and gentle a tone before, though they loved one another well, and were far more sympathetic than most mothers and daughters. And besides, that knock was so unlike mamma's. Why so soft and low?

Had mamma discovered her? With a despairing sense of being caught she looked down at her tell-tale clothes and the unslept-in bed.

"Oh, what shall I ever do?" she thought to herself, confusedly. "I can't let mamma come in and catch me like this. She'll ask why on earth I didn't undress last night. And then what could I ever say? How could I ever explain to her?"

The awful sense of shame-facedness grew upon her still more deeply than ever. She jumped up and whispered through the door, in a very penitent voice, "Oh, mother, I can't let you in just yet. Do you mind waiting five minutes? Come again by-and-by. I—I—I'm so awfully tired and queer this morning somehow."

Mrs. Clifford's voice had an answering little ring of terror in it, as she replied at once, in the same soft tone—

"Very well, darling. That's all right. Stay as long as you like. Don't trouble to get up if you'd rather have your breakfast in bed. And don't hurry yourself at all. I'll come back by-and-by and see what's the matter."

Elma didn't know why, but by the very tone of her mother's voice she felt dimly conscious something strange had happened. Mrs. Clifford spoke with unusual gentleness, yet with an unwonted tremor.

"Thank you, dear," Elma answered through the door, going back to the bedside and beginning to undress in a tumult of shame. "Come again by-and-by. In just five minutes." It would do her good, she knew, in spite of her shyness, to talk with her mother. Then she folded her clothes neatly, one by one, on a chair; hid the peccant boa away in its own lower drawer; buttoned her neat little embroidered nightdress tightly round her throat; arranged her front hair into a careless disorder; and tried to cool down her fiery red cheeks with copious bathing in cold water. When Mrs. Clifford came back five minutes later, everything looked to the outer eye of a mere casual observer exactly as if Elma had laid in bed all night, curled up between the sheets, in the most orthodox fashion.

But all these elaborate preparations didn't for one moment deceive the mother's watchful glance, or the keen intuition shared by all the women of the Clifford family. She looked tenderly at Elma—Elma with her face half buried in the pillows, and the tell-tale flush still crimsoning her cheek in a single round spot; then she turned for a second to the clothes, too neatly folded on the chair by the bedside, as she murmured low—

"You're not well this morning, my child. You'd better not get up. I'll bring you a cup of tea and some toast myself. You don't feel hungry, of course. Ah, no, I thought not. Just a slice of dry toast —yes, yes. I have been there. Some eau de Cologne on your forehead, dear? There, there, don't cry, Elma. You'll be better by-and-by. Stop in bed till lunch-time. I won't let Lucy come up with the tea, of course. You'd rather be alone. You were tired last night. Don't be afraid, my darling. It'll soon pass off. There's nothing on earth, nothing at all to be alarmed at."

She laid her hand nervously on Elma's arm. Half dead with shame as she was, Elma noticed it trembled. She noticed, too, that mamma seemed almost afraid to catch her eye. When their glance met for an instant the mother's eyelids fell, and her cheek, too, burned bright red, almost as red, Elma felt, as her own that nestled hot so deep in the pillow. Neither said a word to the other of what she thought or felt. But their mute sympathy itself made them more shame-faced than ever. In some dim, indefinite, instinctive fashion, Elma knew her mother was vaguely aware what she had done last night. Her gaze fell half unconsciously on the bottom drawer. With quick insight, Mrs. Clifford's eye followed her daughter's. Then it fell as before. Elma looked up at her terrified, and burst into a sudden flood of tears. Her mother stooped down and caught her wildly in her arms. "Cry, cry, my darling," ahe murmured, clasping her hard to her breast. "Cry, cry; it'll do you good; there's safety in crying. Nobody but I shall come near you to-day. Nobody else shall know! Don't be afraid of me! Have not I been there, too? It's nothing, nothing."

With a burst of despair, Elma laid her face in her mother's bosom. Some minutes later, Mrs. Clifford went down to meet her husband in the breakfast-room.

"Well?" the father asked, shortly, looking hard at his wife's face, which told its own tale at once, for it was white and pallid.

"Well!" Mrs. Clifford answered, with a pre-occupied air. "Elma's not herself this morning at all. Had a nervous turn after she went to her room last night. I know what it is. I suffered from them myself when I was about her age." Her eyes fell quickly and she shrank from her husband's searching glance. She was a plump-faced and well-favoured British matron now, but once, many years before, as a slim young girl, she had been in love with somebody—somebody whom by superior parental wisdom she was never allowed to marry, being put off instead with a well-connected match, young Mr. Clifford of the Colonial Office. That was all. No more romance than that. The common romance of every woman's heart. A forgotten love. Yet she tingled to remember it.

"And you think?" Mr. Clifford asked, laying down his newspaper and looking very grave.

"I don't think. I know," his wife answered hastily. "I was wrong the other day, and Elma's in love with that young man, Cyril Waring. I know more than that, Reginald; I know you may crush

her; I know you may kill her; but if you don't want to do that, I know she must marry him. Whether we wish it, or whether we don't, there's nothing else to be done. As things stand now, it's inevitable, unavoidable. She'll never be happy with anybody else—she must have HIM—and I, for one, won't try to prevent her."

Mr. Reginald Clifford, C.M.G., sometime Administrator of the island of St. Kitts, gazed at his wife in blank astonishment. She spoke decidedly; he had never heard her speak with such firmness in his life before. It fairly took his breath away. He gazed at his wife blankly as he repeated to himself in very slow and solemn tones, each word distinct, "You, for one, won't try to prevent her!"

"No, I won't," Mrs. Clifford retorted defiantly, assured in her own mind she was acting right. "Elma's really in love with him; and I won't let Elma's life be wrecked—as some lives have been wrecked, and as some mothers would wreck it."

Mr. Clifford leaned back in his chair, one mass of astonishment, and let the Japanese paper-knife he was holding in his right hand drop clattering from his fingers. "If I hadn't heard you say it yourself, Louisa," he answered, with a gasp, "I could never have believed it. I could—never—have—believed it. I don't believe it even now. It's impossible, incredible."

"But it's true," Mrs. Clifford repeated. "Elma must marry the man she's in love with."

Meanwhile poor Elma lay alone in her bedroom upstairs, that awful sense of remorse and shame still making her cheeks tingle with unspeakable horror. Mrs. Clifford brought up her cup of tea herself. Elma took it with gratitude, but still never dared to look her mother in the face. Mrs. Clifford, too, kept her own eyes averted. It made Elma's self-abasement even profounder than before to feel that her mother instinctively knew everything.

The poor child lay there long, with a burning face and tingling ears, too ashamed to get up and dress herself and face the outer world, too ashamed to go down before her father's eyes, till long after lunchtime. Then there came a noise at the door once more; the rustling of a dress; a retreating footstep. Somebody pushed an envelope stealthily under the door. Elma picked it up and examined it curiously. It bore a penny stamp, and the local postmark. It must have come then by the two o'clock delivery, without a doubt; but the address, why, the address was written in some unknown hand, and in printing capitals. Elma tore it open with a beating heart, and read the one line of manuscript it contained, which was also written in the same print-like letters.

"Don't be afraid," the letter said, "It will do you no harm. Resist it when it comes. If you do, you will get the better of it."

Elma looked at the letter over and over again in a fever of dismay. She was certain it was her mother had written that note. But she read it with tears, only half-reassured—and then burnt it to ashes, and proceeded to dress herself.

When she went down to the drawing-room, Mrs. Clifford rose from her seat, and took her hand in her own, and kissed her on one cheek as if nothing out of the common had happened in any way. The talk between them was obtrusively commonplace. But all that day long, Elma noticed her mother was far tenderer to her than usual; and when she went up to bed Mrs. Clifford held her fingers for a moment with a gentle pressure, and kissed her twice upon her eyes, and stifled a sigh, and then broke from the room as if afraid to speak to her.

CHAPTER X.
COLONEL KELMSCOTT'S REPENTANCE

Elma Clifford wasn't the only person who passed a terrible night and suffered a painful awakening on the morning after the Holkers' garden-party. Colonel Kelmscott, too, had his bad half-hour or so before he finally fell asleep; and he woke up next day to a sense of shame and remorse far more definite, and, therefore, more poignant and more real than Elma's.

Hour after hour, indeed, he lay there on his bed, afraid to toss or turn lest he should wake Lady Emily, but with his limbs all fevered and his throat all parched, thinking over the strange chance that had thus brought him face to face, on the threshold of his honoured age, with the two lads he had wronged so long and so cruelly.

The shock of meeting them had been a sudden and a painful one. To be sure, the Colonel had always felt the time might come when his two eldest sons would cross his path in the intricate maze of London society. He had steeled himself, as he thought, to meet them there with dignity and with stoical reserve. He had made up his mind that if ever the names he had imposed upon them were to fall upon his startled ears, no human being that stood by and looked on should note for one second a single tremor of his lips, a faint shudder of surprise, an almost imperceptible flush or pallor on his impassive countenance. And when the shock came, indeed, he had borne it, as he meant to bear it, with military calmness. Not even Mrs. Clifford, he thought, could have discovered from any undertone of his voice or manner that the two lads he received with such well-bred unconcern were his own twin sons, the true heirs and inheritors of the Tilgate Park property.

And yet, the actual crisis had taken him quite by surprise, and shaken him far more than he could ever have conceived possible. For one thing, though he quite expected that some day he would run up unawares against Guy and Cyril, he did NOT expect it would be down in the country, and still less within a few miles' drive of Tilgate. In London, of course, all things are possible. Sooner or later, there, everybody hustles and clashes against everybody. For that reason, he had tried to suggest, by indirect means, when he launched them on the world, that the twins should tempt their fortune in India or the colonies. He would have liked to think they were well out of his way, and out of Granville's, too. But, against his advice, they had stayed on in England. So he expected to meet them some day, at the Academy private view, perhaps, or in Mrs. Bouverie Barton's literary saloon, but certainly NOT on the close sward of the Holkers' lawn, within a few short miles of his own home at Tilgate.

And now he had met them, his conscience, that had lain asleep so long, woke up of a sudden with a terrible start, and began to prick him fiercely.

If only they had been ugly, misshapen, vulgar; if only they had spoken with coarse, rough voices, or irritated him by their inferior social tone, or shown themselves unworthy to be the heirs of Tilgate —why then, the Colonel might possibly have forgiven himself! But to see his own two sons, the sons he had never set eyes on for twenty-five years or more, grown up into such handsome, well-set, noble-looking fellows—so clever, so bright, so able, so charming—to feel they were in every way as much gentlemen born as Granville himself, and to know he had done all three an irreparable wrong, oh, THAT was too much for him. For he had kept two of his sons out of their own all these years, only in order to make the position and prospects of the third, at last, certainly doubtful, and perhaps wretched.

There was much to excuse him to himself, no doubt, he cried to his own soul piteously in the night watches. Proud man as he was, he could not so wholly abase himself even to his inmost self as to admit he had sinned without deep provocation. He thought it all over in his heart, just there, exactly as it all happened, that simple and natural tale of a common wrong, that terrible secret of a lifetime that he was still to repent in sackcloth and ashes.

It was so long before—all those twenty-six years, or was it twenty-eight?—since his regiment had been quartered away down in Devonshire. He was a handsome subaltern then, with a frank open face—Harry Kelmscott, of the Greys—just such another man, he said to himself in his remorse, as his son Granville now—or rather, perhaps, as Guy and Cyril Waring. For he couldn't conceal from himself any longer the patent fact that Lucy Waring's sons were like his own old self, and sturdier, handsomer young fellows into the bargain than Lady Emily Kelmscott's boy Granville, whom he had made into the heir of the Tilgate manors. The moor, where the Greys were quartered that summer, was as dull as ditch-water. No society, no dances, no hunting, no sport; what wonder a man of his tastes, spoiling for want of a drawing-room to conquer, should have kept his hand in with pretty Lucy Waring?

But he married her—he married her. He did her no wrong in the end.

He hadn't that sin at least to lay to his conscience.

Ah, well, poor Lucy! he had really been fond of her; as fond as a Kelmscott of Tilgate could reasonably be expected ever to prove towards the daughter of a simple Dartmoor farmer. It began in flirtation, of course, as such things will begin; and it ended, as they will end, too, in love, at least on poor Lucy's side, for what can you expect from a Kelmscott of Tilgate? And, indeed, indeed, he said to himself earnestly, he meant her no harm, though he seemed at times to be cruel to her. As soon as he gathered how deeply she was entangled—how seriously she took it all—how much she was in love with him—he tried hard to break it off, he tried hard to put matters to her in their proper light; he tried to show her that an officer and a gentleman, a Kelmscott of Tilgate, could never really have dreamed of marrying the half-educated, half-peasant daughter of a Devonshire farmer. Though, to be sure, she was a lady in her way, too, poor Lucy; as much of a lady in manner and in heart as Emily herself, whose father was an earl, and whose mother was a marquis's eldest daughter.

So much a lady in her way, in deed, in thought, and all that—one of nature's gentlewomen—that when Lucy cried and broke her heart at his halting explanations, he was unmanned by her sobs, and did a thing no Kelmscott of Tilgate should ever have stooped to do—yes, promised to marry her. Of course, he didn't attempt in his own heart to justify that initial folly, as lie thought it, to himself. He didn't pretend to condone it. He only allowed he had acted like a fool. A Kelmscott of Tilgate should have drawn back long before, or else, having gone so far, should have told the girl plainly—at whatever cost, to her—he could go no further and have no more to say to her.

To be sure, that would have killed the poor thing outright. But a Kelmscott, you know, should respect his order, and shouldn't shrink for a moment from these trifling sacrifices!

However, his own heart was better, in those days, than his class philosophy. He couldn't trample on poor Lucy Waring. So he made a fool of himself in the end—and married Lucy. Ah, well! ah, well! every man makes a fool of himself once or twice in his life; and though the Colonel was ashamed now of having so far bemeaned his order as to marry the girl, why, if the truth must out, he would have been more ashamed still, in his heart of hearts, even then, if he hadn't married her. He was better than his creed. He could never have crushed her.

Married her, yes; but not publicly, of course. At least, he respected public decency. He married her under his own name, to be sure, but by special licence, and at a remote little village on the far side of the moor, where nobody knew either himself or Lucy. In those days, he hadn't yet come into possession of the Tilgate estates; and if his father had known of it—well, the Admiral was such a despotic old man that he'd have insisted on his son's selling out at once, and going off to Australia or heaven knows where, on a journey round the world, and breaking poor Lucy's heart by his absence. Partly for her sake, the Colonel said to himself now in the silent night, and partly for his own, he had concealed the marriage—for the time being—from the Admiral.

And then came that horrible embroilment—oh, how well he remembered it. Ah me, ah me, it seemed but yesterday—when his father insisted he was to marry Lady Emily Croke, Lord Aldeburgh's daughter; and he dared not marry her, of course, having a wife already, and he dared not tell his

father, on the other hand, why he couldn't marry her. It was a hateful time. He shrank from recalling it. He was keeping Lucy, then his own wedded wife, as Mrs. Waring, in small rooms in Plymouth; and yet he was running up to town now and again, on leave, as the gay young bachelor, the heir of Tilgate Park—and meeting Emily Croke at every party he went to in London—and braving the Admiral's wrath by refusing to propose to her. What he would ever have done if Lucy had lived, he couldn't imagine. But, there! Lucy DIDN'T live; so he was saved that bother. Poor child, it brought tears to his eyes even now to think of her. He brushed them furtively away, lest he should waken Lady Emily.

And yet it was a shock to him, the night Lucy died. Just then, he could hardly realize how lucky was the accident. He sat there by her side, the day the twins were born, to see her safely through her trouble; for he had always done his duty, after a fashion, by Lucy. When a girl of that class marries a gentleman, don't you see, and consents, too, mind you, to marry him privately, she can't expect to share much of her husband's company. She can't expect he should stultify himself by acknowledging her publicly before his own class. And, indeed, he always meant to acknowledge her in the end—after his father's death, when there was no fear of the Admiral's cutting off his allowance.

But how curiously events often turn out of themselves. The twins were born on a Friday morning, and by the Saturday night, poor Lucy was lying dead, a pale, sweet corpse, in her own little room, near the Hoe, at Plymouth. It was a happy release for him though he really loved her. But still, when a man's fool enough to love a girl below his own station in life—the Colonel paused and broke off. It was twenty-seven years ago now, yet he really loved her. He couldn't find it in his heart even then to indorse to the full the common philosophy of his own order.

So there he was left with the two boys on his hands, but free, if he liked, to marry Lady Emily. No reason on earth, of course, why he shouldn't marry her now. So, naturally, he married her—after a fortnight's interval. The Admiral was all smiles and paternal blessings at this sudden change of front on his son's part. Why the dickens Harry hadn't wanted to marry the girl before, to be sure he couldn't conceive; hankering after some missy in the country, he supposed, that silly rot about what they call love, no doubt; but now that Harry had come to his senses at last, and taken the Earl's lass, why, the Admiral was indulgence and munificence itself; the young people should have an ample allowance, and my daughter-in-law, Lady Emily, should live on the best that Tilgate and Chetwood could possibly afford her.

What would you have? the Colonel asked piteously, in the dead of night, of his own conscience. How else could he have acted? He said nothing. That was all, mind you, he declared to himself more than once in his own soul. He told no lies. He made no complications. While the Admiral lived, he brought up Lucy's sons, quite privately, at Plymouth. And as soon as ever the Admiral died, he really and truly meant to acknowledge them.

But fathers never die—in entailed estates. The Admiral lived so long—quite, quite too long for Guy and Cyril. Granville was born, and grew to be a big boy, and was treated by everybody as the heir to Tilgate. And now the Colonel's difficulties gathered thicker around him. At last, in the fulness of time, the Admiral died, and slept with his fathers, whose Elizabethan ruff's were the honour and glory of the chancel at Tilgate; and then the day of reckoning was fairly upon him. How well he remembered that awful hour. He couldn't, he couldn't. He knew it was his duty to acknowledge his rightful sons and heirs, but he hadn't the courage. Things had all altered so much.

Meanwhile, Guy and Cyril had gone to Charterhouse as nobody's wards, and been brought up in the expectation of earning their own livelihood, so no wrong, he said casuistically, had been done to THEM, at any rate. And Granville had been brought up as the heir of Tilgate. Lady Emily naturally expected her son to succeed his father. He had gone too far to turn back at last. And yet—

And yet, in his own heart, disguise it as he might, he knew he was keeping his lawful sons out of their own in the end, and it was his duty to acknowledge them as the heirs of Tilgate.

CHAPTER XI.
A FAMILY JAR

Hour after hour the unhappy man lay still as death on his bed and reasoned in vain with his accusing conscience. To be sure, he said to himself, no man was bound by the law of England to name his heir. It is for the eldest son himself to come forward and make his claim. If Guy and Cyril could prove their title to the Tilgate estates when he himself was dead, that was their private business. He wasn't bound to do anything special to make the way easy for them beforehand.

But still, when he saw them, his heart arose and smote him. His very class prejudices fought hard on their behalf. These men were gentlemen, the eldest sons of a Kelmscott of Tilgate—true Kelmscotts to the core—handsome, courtly, erect of bearing. Guy was the very image of the Kelmscott of Tilgate Park who bled for King Charles at Marston Moor; Cyril had the exact mien of Sir Rupert Kelmscott, Knight of Chetwood, the ablest of their race, whose portrait, by Kneller, hung in the great hall between his father; the Admiral, and his uncle, Sir Frederick. They had all the qualities the Colonel himself associated with the Kelmscott name. They were strong, brave, vigorous, able to hold their own against all comers. To leave them out in the cold was not only wrong—it was also, he felt in his heart of hearts, a treason to his order.

At last, after long watching, he fell asleep. But he slept uneasily. When he woke, it was with a start. He found himself murmuring to himself in his troubled sleep, "Break the entail, and settle a sum on the two that will quiet them."

It was the only way left to prevent public scandal, and to save Lady Emily and his son Granville from a painful disclosure: while, at the same time, it would to some extent satisfy the claims of his conscience.

Compromise, compromise; there's nothing like compromise. Colonel Kelmscott had always had by temperament a truly British love of compromise.

To carry out his plan, indeed, it would be necessary to break the entail twice; once formally, and once again really. He must begin by getting Granville's consent to the proposed arrangement, so as to raise ready money with which to bribe the young men; and as soon as Granville's consent was obtained, he must put it plainly to Guy and Cyril, as an anonymous benefactor, that if they would consent to accept a fixed sum in lieu of all contingencies, then the secret of their birth would be revealed to them at last, and they would be asked to break the entail on the estates as eldest sons of a gentleman of property.

It was a hard bargain; a very hard bargain; but then these boys would jump at it, no doubt; expecting nothing as they did, they'd certainly jump at it. It's a great point, you see, to come in suddenly, when you expect nothing, to a nice lump sum of five or six thousand!

So much so, indeed, that the real difficulty, he thought, would rather lie in approaching Granville.

After breakfast that morning, however, he tapped his son on the shoulder as he was leaving the table, and said to him, in his distinctly business tone, "Granville, will you step with me into the library for ten minutes' talk? There's a small matter of the estate I desire to discuss with you."

Granville looked back at him with a curiously amused air.

"Why, yes," he said shortly. "It's a very odd coincidence. But do you know, I was going this morning myself to ask for a chance of ten minutes' talk with you."

He rose, and followed his father into the oak-panelled library. The Colonel sat down on one of the uncomfortable library chairs, especially designed, with their knobs and excrescences, to prevent the bare possibility of serious study. Granville took a seat opposite him, across the formal oak table.

Colonel Kelmscott paused; and cleared his throat nervously. Then, with military promptitude, he darted straight into the very thick of the fray.

"Granville," he said abruptly, "I want to speak with you about a rather big affair. The fact of it is, I'm going to break the entail. I want to raise some money."

The son gave a little start of surprise and amusement. "Why, this is very odd," he exclaimed once more, in an astonished tone. "That's just the precise thing I wanted to talk about with you."

Colonel Kelmscott eyed him with an answering start.

"Not debts!" he said slowly. "My boy, my boy, this is bad. Not debts surely, Granville; I never suspected it."

"Oh, dear no," Granville answered frankly. "No debts, you may be sure. But I wanted to feel myself on a satisfactory basis—as to income and so forth: and I was prepared to pay for my freedom well. To tell you the truth outright, I want to marry."

Colonel Kelmscott eyed him close with a very puzzled look. "Not Elma Clifford, my boy," he said again quickly. "For of course, if it is her, Granville, I need hardly say—"

The young man cut him short with a hasty little laugh. "Elma Clifford," he repeated, with some scorn in his musical voice, "Oh, dear no, not HER. If it had been her you may be sure there'd be no reason of any sort for breaking the entail. But the fact is this: I dislike allowances one way or the other. I want to feel once for all I'm my own master. I want to marry—not this girl or that, but whom ever I will. I don't care to come to you with my hat in my hand, asking how much you'll be kind enough to allow me if I venture to take Miss So-and-so or Miss What-you-may-call-it. And as I know you want money yourself for this new wing you're thinking of, why, I'm prepared to break the entail at once, and sell whatever building land you think right and proper."

The father held his breath. What on earth could this mean? "And who is the girl, Granville?" he asked, with unconcealed interest.

"You won't care to hear," his son answered carelessly.

Colonel Kelmscott looked across at him with a very red face. "Not some girl who'll bring disgrace upon your mother, I hope?" he said, with a half-pang of remorse, remembering Lucy. "Not some young woman beneath your own station in life. For to that, you may be sure, I'll never consent under any circumstances."

Granville drew himself up proudly, with a haughty smile. He was a Kelmscott, too, as arrogant as the best of them.

"No, that's not the difficulty," he answered, looking rather amused than annoyed or frightened. "My tastes are NOT low. I hope I know better than to disgrace my family. The lady I want to marry, and for whose sake I wish you to make some arrangement beforehand is—don't be surprised—well, Gwendoline Gildersleeve."

"Gwendoline Gildersleeve," his father echoed, astonished; for there was feud between the families, "That rascally, land-grabbing barrister's daughter! Why, how on earth do you come to know anything of her, Granville? Nobody in Surrey ever had the impertinence yet to ask me or mine to meet the Gildersleeves anywhere, since that disgraceful behaviour of his about the boundary fences. And I didn't suppose you'd ever even seen her."

"Nobody in Surrey ever did ask me to meet her," Granville answered somewhat curtly. "But you can't expect every one in London society to keep watch over the quarrels of every country parish in provincial England! It wouldn't be reasonable. I met Gwendoline, if you want to know, at the Bertrams', in Berkeley Square, and she and I got on so well together that we've—well, we've met from time to time in the Park, since our return from town, and we think by this time we may consider ourselves informally engaged to one another."

Colonel Kelmscott gazed at his son in a perfect access of indignant amazement. Gilbert Gildersleeve's daughter! That rascally Q.C.'s! At any other moment such a proposal would have driven

him forthwith into open hostilities. If Granville chose to marry a girl like that, why, Granville might have lived on what his father would allow him.

Just now, however, with this keen fit of remorse quite fresh upon his soul about poor Lucy's sons, Colonel Kelmscott was almost disposed to accept the opening thus laid before him by Granville's proposal.

So he temporized for awhile, nursing his chin with his hand, and then, after much discussion, yielded at last a conditional consent—conditional upon their mutual agreement as to the terms on which the entail was to be finally broken.

"And what sort of arrangement do you propose I should make for your personal maintenance, and this Gildersleeve girl's household?" the Colonel asked at length, with a very red face, descending to details.

His son, without appearing to notice the implied slight to Gwendoline, named the terms that he thought would satisfy him.

"That's a very stiff sum," the master of Tilgate retorted; "but perhaps I could manage it; per—haps I could manage it. We must sell the Dowlands farm at once, that's certain, and I must take the twelve thousand or so the land will fetch for my own use, absolutely and without restriction."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.