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Содержание

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Chapter One.
By a Thread

It was a long, thin, white finger, one which had felt the throbbing of hundreds and thousands of pulses, and Doctor Praed, after viciously flicking at a fly which tried persistently to settle upon his ivory-white, shiny, bald head, hooked that finger into Clive Reed's button-hole, just below the white rosebud Janet had given him a little earlier in the evening.

"Mind the flower."

"All right, puppy. Come here. I want to talk to you."

"About Janet?"

"Pish! mawkish youth. Great ugly fellow like you thinking of nothing else but Janet. Wait till you've been her slave as I have for eighteen years."

"Pleasant slavery, Doctor," said the young man, smiling, as he allowed himself to be led out on to the verandah just over the gas-lamp which helped to light up Great Guildford Street, W.C.

"Is it, sir? You don't know what a jealous little she-tartar she is."

"I warn you I shall tell her every word you say, Doctor. But it's of no good. I shall not back out. Look at her dear face now."

Reed caught the little Doctor by the shoulder, and pointed to where his daughter sat with the light of one of the shaded lamps falling upon her pretty, animated face, as she laughed at something a sharp-looking, handsome young man was saying – an anecdote of some kind which amused the rest of the group in old Grantham Reed's drawing-room.

"Oh yes, she's pretty enough," said the Doctor testily. "I wish she weren't. Don't let that brother of yours be quite so civil to her, boy. I don't like Jessop."

"Nor me?" said the young man, smiling.

"Of course I don't, sir. Hang it all! how can a man like the young scoundrel who robs him of his child's love?"

"No, sir," said Clive Reed gravely; "only evokes a new love that had lain latent, and offers him the love and respect of a son as well."

Doctor Praed caught the young man's hand in his and gave it a firm pressure. Then he cleared his throat before he spoke again, but his voice sounded husky as he said —

"God bless you, my dear boy."

And then he stopped, and stood gazing through the window at the pleasant little party, as two neatly-dressed maids entered and began to remove the tea-things, one taking out the great plated urn, while the other collected the cups and saucers.

"The old man hasn't bad taste in maids," he said, with his voice

still a little shaky, and as if he wanted to steady it before going on with something he wished to say. "Why don't he have men?"

"He will not. He prefers to have maids about."

"Then he ought to have ugly ones," continued the Doctor, who keenly watched the movements of the slight, pretty, fair girl who was collecting the cups, and who exchanged glances with Jessop Reed as she took the cup and saucer he handed her. "A man who has two ugly scoundrels of sons has no business to keep damsels like that."

"This ugly scoundrel is always out and busy over mining matters; that ugly scoundrel is living away at chambers, money-making at the Stock Exchange," said Clive, smiling.

"Humph! Mining and undermining. Well, young men like to look at pretty girls."

"Of course, Doctor," said Clive. "I do. I'm looking now at the prettiest, sweetest – "

"Don't be a young fool," cried the Doctor testily. "I can describe Janet better than you can. Now, look here, boy; I've got two things to say to you. First of all, about this 'White Virgin'."

"Yours?" said Clive, still glancing at Janet, over whom his brother was now bending, as the maid who carried the tray made the cups dash as she opened the door, and then hurried out as if to avoid a scolding.

"No, young idiot; yours – your father's," said the Doctor, rather sharply. "Hang that organ!"

"Yes, they are a nuisance," said the younger man, as one of

the popular tunes was struck up just inside the square.

"Well, what about the mine, sir?"

"Only this, my lad: I've got a few thousands put aside; you know that."

"Yes, sir; I supposed you had."

"Oh, you knew," said the Doctor suspiciously.

"Yes; I think I heard something of the kind."

"Humph!"

"There, Doctor, don't take up that tone. Give me Janet, and leave your money to a hospital."

"No; hang me if I do! I haven't patience with them, sir. The way in which hospitals are imposed upon is disgraceful. People who ought to be able to pay for medical and surgical advice go and sponge upon hospitals in a way that – Oh, hang it, that's not what I wanted to say. Look here, Clive, if this new mine – "

"No, sir: very old mine."

"Well, very old mine – is a good thing, I should like to have a few thousands in it. Now, then, would it be safe? Stop, confound you! If you deceive me, you shan't have Janet."

"If ever I'm ill, I shall go to another doctor," said Clive quietly.

"Yes, you'd better, sir! He'd poison you."

"Well, he wouldn't insult me, Doctor."

"Bah! nonsense; I was joking, my dear boy. Come, tell me. Here, feel the pulse of my purse, and tell me what to do."

"I will," said the younger man. "Wait, sir. I don't know enough about it yet to give a fair opinion. At present everything looks

wonderfully easy. It's a very ancient mine. It was worked by the Romans, and whatever was done was in the most primitive way, leaving lodes and veins untouched, and which are extending possibly to an immense depth, rich, and probably containing a very large percentage of silver."

"Well, come, that's good enough for anything."

"Yes, but I am not sure yet, Doctor. I'm not going to give you advice that might result in your losing heavily, and then upbraiding me for years to come."

"No, dear boy. You would only be losing your own money; for, of course, it will be Janet's and yours."

"Bother the money!" said the young man shortly. "Look here, Doctor; as a mining engineer, I should advise every one but those who want to do a bit of gambling, and are ready to take losses philosophically, to have nothing to do with mines. If, however, I can help you with this, I will tell you all I know as fast as I learn it."

"That'll do, boy. Now about the other matter. You know I make use of my eyes a good deal."

"Yes," said the young man anxiously.

"Then, to put it rather brutally and plainly, boy, I don't like the look of the old dad."

"Doctor Praed!" cried the young man in a voice full of agony, as he turned and gazed anxiously into the drawing-room, where Grantham Reed, one of the best known floaters of mining projects in the City, sat back in his chair, holding Janet Praed's

hand, and patting it gently, as he evidently listened to something his elder son was relating. "Why, what nonsense! I never saw him look better in my life."

"Perhaps not – you didn't," said the Doctor drily.

"I beg your pardon. But has he complained?"

"No; he has nothing to complain of, poor fellow; but all the same, we doctors see things sometimes which tell us sad tales. Look here, Clive, my boy. I speak to you like a son, because you are going to be my son. I can't talk to your brother, though he is the elder, and ought to stand first. I don't like Jessop."

"Jess is a very good fellow when you know him as I do," said Clive coldly.

"I'm very glad to hear it, boy," said the Doctor. "But look here; your father's in a very bad way, and he ought to be told."

"But are you sure, sir?" said Clive, in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, I am sure," said the Doctor. "I have been watching him for the past six months in doubt. Now I know. Will you tell him, or shall I?"

"Tell him!" faltered Clive.

"Yes; a man in his position must have so much to do about his money affairs – winding up matters, while his mind is still strong and clear."

"But he is well and happy," said Clive. "How could I go to him and say – "

"Here, where's that Doctor?" came from within, in a strong voice. "Oh, there you are! It's going on for ten, and I must have

one rubber before you start."

Five minutes later four people were seated at a card-table, one of whom was Clive Reed, whose hands were cold and damp, as he felt as if he were playing for his father's life in some great game of chance, while in the farther drawing-room Janet Praed was singing a ballad in a low, sweet voice, and Clive's sharp-looking, keen-eyed brother was turning over the music leaves and passing compliments, at which his sister-in-law elect uttered from time to time in the intervals of the song a half-pained, half-contemptuous laugh.

Chapter Two.
Arch-Plotters

"Hullo, my noble! what brings you here?"

Jessop Reed took off his glossy, fashionable hat, laid a gold-headed malacca cane across it as he placed it upon the table, and then shot his cuffs out of the sleeves of his City garments, cut in the newest style, and apparently fresh that day. Tie, collar, sleeve-links, pin, chain, tightly-cut trousers, spats, and patent shoes betokened the dandy of the Stock Exchange, and the cigar-case he took out was evidently the last new thing of its kind.

"Cigar?" he said, opening and offering it to the dark, sallow, youngish man seated at an office table, for he had not risen when his visitor to the office in New Inn entered.

"Eh? Well, I don't mind. Yours are always so good."

He selected one, declined a patent cutter, preferring to use a very keen penknife which lay on the table, but he accepted the match which his visitor extracted from the interior of a little Japanese owl, and deftly lit by rubbing it along his leg. The next minute the two men sat smoking and gazing in each other's eyes.

"Well, my brilliant, my jasper and sardine stone, what brings you through grimy Wych Street to these shades?"

"You're pretty chippy this morning, Wrigley. Been doing somebody?"

"No, my boy; hadn't a chance. Have you come to be done?"

"Yes; gently. Short bill on moderate terms."

"What! You don't mean to say that you, my hero on 'Change, who are turning over money, as it were, with a pitchfork, are coming to me?"

"I am, though, so no humbug."

"'Pon my word! A fellow with a dad like a Rothschild and a brother that – here, why don't you ask the noble Clive?"

"Hang Clive!" snapped out Jessop.

"Certainly, my dear fellow, if you wish it," said John Wrigley. "Hang Clive! Will that do?"

"I don't care about worrying the old man, and there's a little thing on in Argentines this morning. I want a hundred at once."

"In paper?"

"Look here, Wrigley, if you won't let me have the stuff, say so, and I'll go to some one else."

"And pay twice as much as I shall charge, my dear boy. Don't be so peppery. Most happy to oblige you, and without consulting my friend in the City, who will have to sell out at a loss, eh? A hundred, eh?"

"Yes, neat."

"All right!"

A slip of blue stamped paper was taken out of a drawer, filled up, passed over for signature, and as Jessop now took up a pen he uttered a loud growl.

"Hundred and twenty in four months! Sixty per cent. Bah!

what a blood-sucker you are!"

"Yes, aren't I?" said the other cheerily. "Don't take my interest first, though, and give you a cheque for eighty, eh?"

He took the bill, glanced at it, and thrust it in a plain morocco case, which he replaced in a drawer, took out a cheque-book, quickly wrote a cheque, signed it, and looked up.

"Cross it?" he said.

"Yes. I shall pay it in. Thanks!"

"There you see the value of a good reputation, my dear Reed; but you oughtn't to be paying for money through the nose like that."

"No," said the visitor, with a snarl, "I oughtn't to be, but I do. If the dear brother wants any amount, there it, is; but if I want it – cold shoulder."

"So it is, my dear fellow; some are favourites for a time, some are not: Let me see. He's engaged to the rich doctor's daughter, isn't he?"

"Oh yes, bless me," said Jessop. "All the fat and gravy of life come to him."

The young lawyer threw one leg over the other and clasped his hands about his knee.

"Ah! yes," he said seriously, "the distribution of money and honour in this world is very unequal. Clive is on that mine, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes; consulting engineer and referee scientific, and all the confounded cant of it. As for a good thing – well, I'm told

not to grumble, and to be content with my commission and all the shares I can get taken up."

"Does seem hard," said Wrigley. "Only for a year or two, eh? And then a sale and a burst up?"

"Don't you make any mistake about that, old man," said Jessop sulkily. "It's a big thing."

"Then why wasn't it taken up before?"

"Because people are fools. They've been so awfully humbugged, too, over mines. This is a very old mine that the governor has been trying to get hold of on the quiet for years, but he couldn't work it till old Lord Belvers died. It has never been worked by machinery, and, as you may say, has only been skinned. There are mints of money in it, my boy, and so I tell you."

Wrigley smiled.

"What is your commission on all the shares you place?"

"Precious little. Eh? Oh, I see; you think I want to plant a few. Not likely. If you wanted a hundred, I couldn't get them for you."

"No, they never are to be had."

"Chaff away. I don't care. You know it's a good thing, or else our governor wouldn't have put his name to it and set so much money as he has."

"To come up and bear a good crop, eh? There, I won't chaff about it, Jessop, boy. I know it's a good thing, and you ought to make a rare swag out of it."

"So that you could too, eh?"

"Of course; so that we could both make a good thing out of it. One is not above making a few thou's, I can tell you. Lead, isn't it?"

"Yes, solid lead. None of your confounded flashy gold-mines."

"But they sound well with the public, Jessop. Gold – gold – gold. The public is not a Bassanio, to choose the lead casket."

"It was a trump ace, though, my boy."

"So it was. But you are only to get a little commission out of sales over this, eh?"

"That's all; and it isn't worth the candle, for there'll be no more to sell. The shares are going up tremendously."

"So I hear – so I hear," said Wrigley thoughtfully; "and you are left out in the cold, and have to come borrowing. Jessop, old man, over business matters you and I are business men, and there is, as the saying goes, no friendship in business."

"Not a bit," said Jessop, with an oath.

"But we are old friends, and we have seen a little life together."

"Ah! we have," said Jessop, nodding his head.

"And, as the world goes, I think we have a little kind of pleasant feeling one for the other."

"Humph! I suppose so," said Jessop, watching the other narrowly with the keen eye of a man who deals in hard cash, and knows the value of a sixteenth per cent, in a large transaction. "Well, what's up?"

"I was thinking, my dear fellow," said the young lawyer, in a

low voice, “how much pleasanter the world would be for you and me if we were rich. But no, no, no. You would not care to fight against your father and brother.”

“Perhaps before long there will only be my brother to fight against,” said Jessop meaningly.

The lawyer looked at him keenly.

“You should not say that without a good reason, Jessop.”

“No, I should not.”

“Well, I don’t ask for your confidence, so let it slide. It was tempting; but there is your brother.”

“Curse my brother!” cried Jessop savagely. “Is he always to stand in my light?”

“That rests with you.”

“Look here, what do you mean?”

“Do you wish me to state what I mean?”

“Yes,” said Jessop excitedly.

“Then I meant this. Your father is very rich, and knows how to protect his interests.”

“Trust him for that.”

“Your brother is well provided for, and can make his way.”

“Oh, hang him, yes. Fortune’s favourite, and no mistake.”

“Then what would you say if – But one moment. You tell me, as man to man, to whom the business would be vital, that the ‘White Virgin’ mine is really a big thing?”

“I tell you, as man to man, that it will be a tremendously big thing.”

"Good!" said the lawyer slowly, and in a low voice. "Then what would you say if I put you in the way of making a few hundred thousand pounds?"

"And yourself too?"

"Of course."

"Then never mind what I should say. Can you do it?"

"Yes. You and I are about the only two men who could work that affair rightly; and as the whole business is to others a speculation, if they lose – well, they have gambled, and must take their chance."

"Of course. But – speak out."

"No, not out, Jessop; we must not so much as whisper. I have that affair under my thumb, and there is a fortune in it for us – the stockbroker and the lawyer. Shall we make a contract of it, hand in hand?"

"Tell me one thing first – it sounds impossible. What would you do?"

"Simply this," said Wrigley, with a smile. "I tell you because you will not go back, neither could I. There's my hand on it."

Jessop eagerly grasped the extended hand.

"It means being loss to thousands – fortune to two."

"Us two?" said Jessop hoarsely.

"Exactly! It is in a nutshell, my boy. All is fair in love, in war, and money-making, eh? Here is my plan."

Chapter Three.
Another

"Come, I say, my dear, what's the good of being so stand-offish. It's very nice and pretty, and makes a man fonder of you, and that's why you do it, I know! I say! I didn't know that the pretty Derbyshire lasses in this out-of-the-way place were as coy and full of their little games as our London girls." Out-of-the-way place indeed! Dinah Gurdon knew that well enough, as, with her teeth set fast and her eyes dilated, she hurried along that afternoon over the mountain-side. The path was an old track, which had been made hundreds of years before, so that ponies could drag the little trucks up and down, and in and out, but always lower and lower to the smelting-house down in the dale, a mere crack in the limestone far below, whose perpendicular jagged walls were draped with ivy, and at whose foot rushed along the clear crystal trout-river, which brought a stranger into those solitudes once in a way. But not on this particular afternoon, for Dinah looked vainly for some tweed-clothed gentleman with lithe rod over his shoulder and fishing-creel slung on back, to whom she could appeal for protection from the man who followed her so closely behind on the narrow, shelf-like path.

Two miles at least to go yet to the solitary nook in the hills

just above the bend in the stream, where the pretty, romantic, flower-clothed cottage stood; and where only, as far as she knew, help could be found. And at last, feeling that she must depend entirely upon herself for protection, she drew her breath hard, and mastered the strong desire within her to cry aloud and run along the stony track as fast as her strength would allow.

But she only walked fast, with her sunburned, ungloved fingers tightly holding her basket, her face hidden by her close sun-bonnet, and her simply made blue spotted cotton dress giving forth a peculiar ruffing sound as she hurried on with "that man" close behind.

She had seen that man again and again for the past two months, and he had spoken to her twice, and each time she had imagined that he was some stranger who was passing through, and whom one might never see again. She knew better now.

He was not a bad-looking fellow of five-and-thirty; and an artist, who could have robed him as he pleased, instead of having him in ordinary clothes, could not have wished for a better model for a picturesque ruffian than Michael Sturgess, a man born in London, but who had passed the greater part of his time in Cornwall and in Wales. A good workman, but one who had a kind of notoriety among his fellows for divers little acts of gallantry, real and imaginary. He was not a man of strong perceptions or experiences out of mines, and he judged womankind, as he called them, by their faces and their clothes. Silk and fashionable bonnets suggested ladies to him; cotton dresses and pretty faces,

girls who enjoyed a bit of flirtation, and who were his lawful prey.

"I say, you know," he cried, "what's the good of rushing on like that, and making yourself so hot? Hold hard now; you've done the coy long enough. Sit down and rest, and let's have a good long talk. You need not look round; there's nobody about, and it's a good two miles to the cottage where your old dad lives."

Dinah started and increased her pace.

"You see I know. I've seen the old boy in his brown alpaca and straw hat; I've watched him, same as I have you – you pretty little bright-eyed darling. Come, stop now; I want to make love to you."

As Michael Sturgess said these last words, he bent forward and caught hold of the folds of the dress, and tried to stop the girl, who sprang round in an instant, striking the dress from the man's hand, and facing him with her handsome face flashing its indignation.

"How dare you!" she cried. "Such insolence! You forget yourself, sir, and if my father were here – "

"Which he isn't, dear. But bravo! That's very nice and pretty, and makes you look ten times as handsome as ever. I like it. I love to see a girl with some pluck in her. But come now, what's the good of going on like that and pretending to be the fine lady, I know what you are, and who you are, and where you live, as I told you."

"I desire you to leave me instantly, sir. My father is a gentleman, and you will be severely punished if you dare to

interrupt me like this."

"Go on," said the man, with a laugh. "I know the old boy, and have talked to him twice. It's all right, dear, don't be so proud. I mean the right thing by you. I'm down here to take charge of the 'White Virgin' yonder, behind where you live, and want to take charge of this little white virgin too. See? I shall have a grand place of it, and I'll make quite the lady of you. There now, you see it's all right. Let me carry the basket; it's too big and heavy for your pretty little hands."

He made a snatch at the creel she was carrying, but she drew back quickly, and hurried on once more, fighting hard to keep back the hysterical tears, and vainly looking to right and left for help or a means of escape from the unwelcome attentions forced upon her. But she looked in vain. The hillside sloped off too rapidly for any one but a most able climber to mount, and to have attempted to descend meant doing so at great risk to life and limb.

There was nothing for it but to hurry on, and this she did with her breath coming faster – faster from excitement and exertion, as she recalled his words.

What did he say? He was in charge of the "White Virgin" mine – the old disused series of shaft and excavation down the narrow chasm which ran like a huge ragged gash into the mountain, and from which hundreds of thousands of tons of stone and refuse had been tilted down the mountain-side to form the moss-grown ugly cascade of stones which stood out from the hill-slope forming a prominent object visible for miles.

The shelf she was following led past the narrow ravine, with its many pathways cut in the steep sides all running towards the great shaft, fenced in with blocks of stone. She had been there several times with her father, bearing him company during his walks in search of minerals, so that the way was perfectly familiar to her, though it was a place not to be approached without a feeling of dread. Country superstition had made it the home of the old miners, who now and then revisited the glimpses of the moon; two people had been, it was said, murdered there, and their bodies hidden in the dark, wet mazes of the workings; and within the recollection of the oldest inhabitant an unhappy forsaken maiden, who feared to face the reproaches of her relatives, had sought oblivion in the water at the bottom of the principal shaft, and her body had never been found.

It was an uncanny place on a bright sunny day – after night a spot to be avoided for many reasons; but Dinah Gurdon approached it now with feelings of hope, for she felt that the man who was in charge would leave her there if she only maintained her firmness.

"Why, what a silly little thing it is!" he said, in a low, eager voice, his words sounding subdued and confidential as he uttered them close to her ear. "What are you afraid of? Why, bless your pretty heart, it's plain to see you haven't been troubled much by the stupid bumpkins about here. Running away like that just because a man tells you he loves you. And I do, my pretty one, and have ever since I came down here. Soon as I clapped eyes

on you, I says to myself, 'That's the lass for me.' Why, I've done down here what I haven't done since I left Sunday-school – I've come three Sundays running to church, so as to see your bonny face. I saw you come by this morning when I was yonder leaning over the fence. 'Going to market,' I says. 'Wonder whether she'd bring me an ounce of tobacco from the shop, if I asked her?' But I was just too late, so I sat down and waited for you. 'She won't want me to be seen with her in the village,' I said. 'Girls like to keep these things quiet at first.' So do I, dear. I say, it's pretty lonesome for me down here till they begin working, but I've got plenty of time for you, so let's make good use of it while we can."

Dinah paid no heed to his words in her alarm, but they forced themselves upon her unwilling ears, as she hurried through the solitary place, feeling that every step took her nearer home, and toward the entrance to the mine gap, where this man would leave her.

"I say, you know, aren't you carrying this on a bit too hard?" he half-whispered. "Isn't it time you gave way just a little bit? You see how nice and gentle I am with you, dear. Some fellows would be rough and lay hold of you, but I'm not that sort. I like to be tender and kind with a girl. Just because one's big and strong, one don't need to be a regular brute. I say, come now, that's enough. Let's look at your pretty face. Take off your sun-bonnet. It's a darned ugly one, and I'll go over to Derby some night and buy you the prettiest that there is in the shops. I will, 'pon my soul! There's no humbug about me, my dear. Why, you've made

this old wilderness look quite cheerful, and if it hadn't been for knowing that you lived down there by the river, I don't believe I should have stopped it out. I should have just written off to the governor and said, 'I'm coming back to London.' I say, wouldn't you like to go up to London, my dear? I'll take you and pay up like a man. – I mean it."

Dinah's heart gave a great leap, for not fifty yards farther on there was the narrow natural gateway in the side of the hill, leading right into the deep, zigzag rift which clave the mountain from the top far down into the bowels of the earth, and spread in secondary maze-like chasms farther and farther in here through the limestone, where the dirty grey lead ore was found in company with masses of crystalline growth glittering with galena. Here, too, was the wondrous conglomerate of lily encrinite, once animated flowers of stone, forming the mountain masses of Derbyshire marble, where a calm sea once spread its deep waters in the days when the earth was young. Here were the beds and veins of the transparent violet spar, locally known as the "Blue John," which glistened here and there in the natural caves, side by side with stalactite and stalagmite, wherever water filtered through the strata, and came out charged with the lime which had gone on cementing spar and shell together into solid blocks.

A weird, strange place to any one save the lovers of the strange, and then only explored in company by the light of chemical and wick. A place generally shunned, and only to

be sought or chosen as a sanctuary by one who was pursued. But circumstances alter cases, and matters happen strangely and influence our lives in unexpected ways.

Dinah Gurdon, Major Gurdon's only child, paying no heed to her follower's words, kept hurrying on, for she had nearly reached the ragged entrance to the mine gap, feeling that at last she would be free, and then the insolent, self-satisfied ruffian would not dare to pursue her farther, for he had said that this was the place he had in charge. But if he did, another quarter of a mile would take her round the great limestone buttress formed by the mine spoil; and then she would be on the south slope of the Tor, in full view of the narrow valley, up out of which her father would probably be coming, and he would see her, as he came to meet her, a mile away.

She had kept to her steady, quick walk as long as she could; but now the exultation produced by the sight of freedom reassured her, and unable to control herself, she started off running past the natural gateway in the rocky wall on her right.

But Michael Sturgess was too quick for her.

"No, you don't, my pretty one," he cried, as he dashed in pursuit, overtook her in a few yards, and caught her by the dress, which tore loudly in his hand. The next moment he had his arm round her waist, but she struck at him wildly as he now held her and blocked her way. There was a momentary struggle, and she was free once more. She turned as if about to leap down the steep slope at her side; but the attempt was too desperate, and she ran

back a few yards, with the man close behind, and then turned again and dashed frantically between the two natural buttresses, down the steep path leading to the mazes and gloomy passages of the ancient mine.

Michael Sturgess stopped short for a moment, burst into a coarse laugh, and gave his leg a slap.

"I knowed it," he cried. "Oh, these girls, these girls!"

The next minute he was in full pursuit, and ten minutes later, faint, wild, and echoing up the walls of the shadowy solitude, there was a piercing cry.

A great bird rose slowly, circling higher about the dismal gap, and then all was still.

Chapter Four.
Jessop's Weakness

"I don't care. I will speak, and if master gets to know, so much the better."

"Will you hold your silly tongue?"

"No, I won't. I've held it too long. It's disgraceful, that's what it is, and I'll tell Mr Clive of your goings-on with his sweetheart."

"Look here, Lyddy, do you want me to poison you, or take you out somewhere and push you into a river?"

"Yes," cried the girl addressed, passionately. "I wish you would, and then there'd be an end of the misery and wretchedness. And as for that Miss Janet Praed – "

"Hold your tongue, you silly, jealous little fool!"

"Oh yes, I know I'm a fool – fool to believe all your wicked lies. And so would you be jealous. I saw it all last time she was here – a slut engaged to be married to your brother, and all the time making eyes at you, while you are carrying on with her shamefully, and before me, too. It's cruel and disgraceful. I may be only a servant, but I've got my feelings the same as other people, and I'd die sooner than behave as she did, and you did, and – and – I wish I was dead, I do – that I do."

"Will you be quiet, you silly little goose. Do you want everybody in the house to know of our flirtation?"

"Flirtation!" cried the girl, wiping her streaming eyes. "You regularly proposed and asked me to be your wife."

"Why, of course. Haven't I promised that I would marry you some day?"

"Yes – some day," said the girl bitterly; "but some day never comes. Oh, Jessop, dear Jessop! you made me love you so, and you're breaking my heart, going on as you do with that Miss Praed."

She threw her arms about his neck, and clung to him till he roughly forced her to quit her hold.

"Are you mad?" he said angrily.

"Yes, very nearly," cried the girl, with her pretty, fair, weak face lighted up with rage. "You've made me so. I'll tell Mr Clive as soon as he comes back from Derbyshire – see if I don't!"

"You'd better," said Jessop grimly. "You dare say a word to a soul, and I'll never put a ring on your finger, my lady – there!"

"Yes, you will – you shall!" cried the girl passionately. "You promised me, and the law shall make you!"

"Will you be quiet? You'll have my father hear you directly."

"And a good job too."

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

"Yes, I do. Master's a dear, good gentleman, and always been nice and kind. I'll tell him – that I will!"

"Not you. There, wipe those pretty little blue eyes, and don't make your dear little puggy nose red, nor your cheeks neither. I don't know, though," whispered Jessop, passing his arm round

the girl and drawing her to him; “it makes you look very sweet and attractive. I say, Lyddy, dear, you are really a beautiful girl, you know.”

“Do adone, Jessop,” she whispered, softening directly, and yielding herself to his touch.

“I couldn’t help loving you, darling, and I love you more and more every day, though you will lead me such a life with your jealousy. I never find fault with you when I see you smiling at Clive.”

“But it is not as I do at you, dear. Mr Clive was always quite the gentleman to me, and it hurts me to see you trying so hard to get Miss Janet away from him.”

“There you go again, little silly. Isn’t she going to be my sister-in-law?”

“It didn’t look like it.”

“Pish! What do you know about such things? In society we are obliged to be a bit polite, and so on.”

“Oh, are we? I know; and if I told Mr Clive, he’d think as I do. I won’t have you make love to her before my very eyes – there!”

“Why, what an unreasonable little pet it is!” he cried, disarming the girl’s resentment with a few caresses.

“And the sooner master knows you are engaged to me the better,” she said, with a sob.

“And then you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that my father has quarrelled with me, and altered his will, so that everything goes to my brother. He may marry you then, for I

couldn't. I shouldn't have a penny to help myself. Oh yes; go and tell. I believe you want to get hold of him now."

The girl gave him a piteous look, and tried to catch his hand, but he avoided her touch, and laughed sneeringly.

"I don't want to be hard and bitter," he said, "but I'm not blind."

She looked up at him reproachfully.

"You don't mean what you are saying," she whispered sadly, "so I shan't fret about that."

"You don't believe me," he said, in a low voice, as he fixed the girl with his eyes, glorying in the knowledge that he had thoroughly subdued her, and that she was his to mould exactly as he willed, to obey him like a slave. "Then you may believe this, that I have told you before. All that has passed between us is our secret, and if you betray it and ruin my prospects, and make me a beggar, you may go and drown yourself as you threatened, for aught I care, for you will have wilfully cut everything between us asunder. Now we understand each other, and you had better go before any one comes." The girl stood gazing at him piteously now, with every trace of anger gone out of her eyes, and her tones, when she spoke, were those of appeal.

"But, Jessop, dear."

"Be quiet, will you," he said angrily.

"Don't speak to me like that, dear," she whispered. "Only tell me you don't care for Miss Praed."

"I won't answer such a baby's stupid questions. You know I

only care for you."

There was a sob, but at the same moment a look of hope to lighten a good deal of despair.

"You are not angry with me, Jessop, dear?"

"Yes, I am, very."

"But you will forgive me, love?"

"Anything, if you'll only be the dear, good, sensible little woman you used to be."

"I will, dear – always," she whispered.

"And fight for me, so that I may not lose."

"Yes, dear, of course."

"Can I trust you, Lyddy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then, whatever happens, you will, for my sake, hold your tongue till I tell you to speak?"

"Yes, if I die for it," she said earnestly.

"I thought you would be sensible," he said, nodding at her. "Come, that's my pretty, wise little woman. Now go about your business, and wait for the bright days to come, when I shall be free to do as I like."

"Yes, Jessop," she whispered, and after a sharp glance at the door she bent forward and kissed him quickly. "But there isn't anything between you and Miss Janet?"

"Of course not," he cried. "As if there could be while you live."

She nodded to him smiling, laid her finger on her lips to show

that they were sealed, and then hurried out of the room.

"Poor little fool!" said Jessop Reed to himself, as soon as he was alone; "you are getting rather in the way."

Chapter Five.
The Treasure House

Clive Reed stood up like a statue on a natural pedestal, high on the precipitous slope. It was a great ponderous block of millstone grit, which had become detached just at the spot where, high up, mountain limestone and the above-named formation joined. And as he looked about him, it seemed wonderful to a man fresh from London that he could find so great a solitude in central England. Look where he would, the various jumbled together eminences of the termination of the Pennine range met his eye; there was hardly a tree in sight, but everywhere hill and deeply cut dale, the down-like tops of the calcareous, and the roughly jagged crags of the grit, while, with the exception of a few white dots on a green slope far away, representing a flock of sheep, there was no sign of life, neither house, hut, nor church spire.

"Yes, there is something alive," said the young man, "for there goes a bee wild-thyme hunting, and whir-r-r-r! Think of that now, as somebody says; who would have expected to see grouse out here in these hills?"

There they were, sure enough, a pair which skimmed by him as he stood at the very edge of the great gash in the mountain-side, at the bottom of which the track ran right into the mine he had come down to inspect for the third time, after walking across

from the town twelve miles distant, where he had left the train on the previous evening.

"Wild, grand, solitary, on a day like this," said Reed to himself; "but what must it be when a western gale is blowing. Come, Master Sturgess, you're behind your time again."

He glanced at his watch.

"No; give the devil his due," he muttered. "I'm half an hour too soon, and, by George, not so solitary as I thought. Behold! two travellers wending their way across the desolate waste, as the novel-writers say. Now what can bring a pair of trousers and a petticoat there?"

The young man shaded his eyes and looked across the gap to where, far away, the two figures he had seen moved so slowly that they seemed to be stationary. Then they separated a little, and the man stooped and then knelt down.

"Can't be flower-gatherers out here. I know: after mushrooms. But let's see."

Clive Reed dragged the strap which supported a tin case slung from his shoulder, forced it aside, and tugged at another strap so as to bring a little binocular into reach; and adjusting this, he followed his natural instinct or some strange law of affinity, and brought the little lenses to bear upon the female in place of the male.

"Not a gentle shepherdess fair, with tously locks and grubby hands and face, though she has a dog by her side," he said to himself. "Looks like a lady – at a distance. Phyllis and Corydon,

eh? No," he added, after an alteration of the glass; "long white hair and grey beard, and – hullo! old chap's got a candle-box. Botanist or some other – ist. Hang it, he's after minerals for a pound, and the lady – in white? Humph, it can't be the 'White Virgin' who gave the name to the mine. Let's – Hands off, old gentleman, or keep your own side. Hah! there goes the dog: after a rabbit, perhaps."

Clive Reed was ready to ask himself directly after, why he should stand there taking so much interest in these two figures, so distant that even with the help of the glass he could not distinguish their features. But watch them he did till they disappeared round a shoulder of the hill.

"Tourists – cheap trippers, I suppose," said the young man, replacing the glass in its sling case. "I wonder where they have come from?" and then with a half laugh, as he took out a cigarette-case and lit up, "I wonder why I take so much interest in them?"

"Answer simple," he continued, with a half laugh; "because they are the only living creatures in sight. Man is a gregarious beast, and likes to greg. I feel ready to go after them and talk. Hallo! here we are! Master Sturgess and two men with a stout ladder, coils of rope, and – if he hasn't brought a crowbar and a lanthorn, woe."

He shaded his eyes again to watch a party of three men toiling up a slope, half a mile away, and began to descend from his coign of vantage to reach the pathway at the entrance to the gap, seeing

as he did that he would not arrive there long before the others.

A glance at his watch showed him that it was still only ten o'clock, for he had started on his mountain tramp at daybreak, and as he walked and slid downward, he calculated that he would have time after the mine examination to make for one of the villages in the neighbourhood of Matlock to pass the night, so as to see as much of the country as he could.

"Morning, Sturgess; you got my letter then?"

"Oh, yes, sir, yesterday morning," said the man, as Reed nodded at his two sturdy followers – rough-looking men of the mining stamp, both of whom acknowledged his salute with a half-sneering smile.

"Brought two different chaps this time. Got enough tackle?"

"Oh, yes, sir; ropes, hammer, spikes, and crowbar."

"Lanthorn?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Shouldn't come on a job like this without a light."

"Then come along."

He led the way through the narrow entrance, where the rock had once upon a time been picked away to allow room for the passage of horses or rough trucks, but now all covered with lichen and the marks of the eroding tooth of Time; and then up and down and in and out along the side of the chasm, which grew more gloomy at every step, deeper into the mountain-side, while the bottom of the gully grew narrower and closer, till it resembled the dried-up bed of a stream which had become half blocked up with the great masses of stone, which had fallen from above.

Clive Reed's eyes were everywhere as they went on – now noticing spots where the sloping walls of rock had been worked for ore, others where trials had been made, honeycombing the rock with shallow cells, but always suggesting that this working must have been ages ago, and in a very superficial primitive fashion. This suggested plenty of prospect for the engineer who would attack the ancient mine with the modern appliances and forces which compel Nature to yield up her hidden treasures, buried away since the beginning of the world.

Clive Reed saw pretty well everything on his way to the dark end, and, after making a few short, sharp, business-like remarks, he said suddenly —

"The plans say there is no way out whatever, beside the entrance."

He turned to Sturgess as he spoke, and a curious look came over the countenance of the guardian of the mine, but before he could speak one of the men behind said —

"Man as didn't mind breaking his neck might get up yonder," and he nodded towards the precipitous side.

"Which means that a rough staircase might easily be made if wanted, and – "

He did not finish speaking, but sprang up on to a block of stone, climbed to another, drew himself on to a third, and extricated something from a niche which had caught his observant eye, and with which he sprang down.

It was a fine cambric handkerchief, which he turned over as

Sturgess looked on stolidly and with the same peculiar look in his countenance.

"Here, somebody may make inquiries about this. You had better take it, Sturgess. Visitors to the old mine perhaps, but they have no business here now. You will keep the place quite private for the present."

The man took the handkerchief, and a keen observer would have thought that he put it out of sight rather hurriedly.

"Blowed in," said one of the others with a laugh. "Wonderful windy up here sometimes."

Reed had started again, and plunging farther and farther into the natural cutting in the mountain-side, soon after reached the end of the *cul de sac*, where, partly obliterated by time, there were abundant traces of the old workings, notably the shafts with their crumbling sides, one going down perpendicularly, and into which the young engineer pushed over a stone. This fell down and down for some time before it struck against a projection with such force that it sent up a hollow reverberating roar, and directly after came the dull, sullen sound of its plunge into the water which had gathered in the huge well-like place.

"She's pretty deep, sir," said one of the men, with a laugh.

"Yes," said Reed, with a nod, and he went on climbing over the blocks of stone fallen from above, and which cumbered the place, to one of the other two shafts, both of which had been made following a lode running raggedly down at an angle of about seventy degrees.

"We'll try this," said Reed sharply.

"Want me to go down and chip off a few bits that seem most likely?" said Sturgess roughly.

"No. Now, my lads, drive the crowbar well in here," said the engineer, indicating a rift close to where they stood, a crevice between two immense blocks of limestone.

"This here one's handier," said one of the men, pointing to a crack close to the opening.

"Yes, and when you have loosened it by driving in that bar, more likely to be pulled down into the shaft. In here, please."

The man inserted the sharp edge of the bar, and his companion made the great chasm echo as he began to drive the iron in with strokes of the heavy hammer he carried, till it was deemed safe.

"Hold a ridgement o' sojers now, sir," said the hammerman.

"Yes, that's safe enough," said Reed; and after carefully examining the ropes, he knotted two together, and formed a loop at the end of one.

"Shall we two go down, sir?"

"No; I am going," replied Reed quietly.

"Find it precious dirty and wet, sir. Best let us."

"No, thank you. Let me down. How far is it to the first level?"

"'Bout two hundred foot, I should say, p'raps more; but I dare say it don't go down so straight far, but works out'ard like. I d'know, though. I've never been down, and nobody as I ever heard of ever did go."

"No," said the other with a laugh, "and strikes me as you won't find nothing worth your while when you do go. The old folks got out all the good stuff from here hundreds o' years ago."

"You will be ready to haul up when I signal," said Reed quietly.

"Oh, yes, sir. You may trust us. We don't want to make an inquess on you."

"Light the lanthorn," said Reed to Sturgess, and taking off the flat tin case he carried slung under his left arm, he took from it a cold chisel and a geologist's hammer; stripped off his coat, rolled up his sleeves over his white muscular arms, and then secured the lanthorn to his waist with the strap of his binocular.

"You'll be careful about the loose stones, my men," he said in quick, decisive tones. "You, Sturgess, will follow me as soon as I have sent up the rope."

The men nodded as Reed slipped the loop over his head, and then sat in it, and without a moment's hesitation, after the men had passed the rope round the upright bar, he lowered himself over the rugged side of the shaft, and was rapidly allowed to descend past the rough stones which formed the bottom of the slope, and showed traces still of how it had been ground away for ages by the passage over it of the freshly extracted ore.

It was a primitive way of descending, but in all probability the old manner had been as rough, and there was little to trouble a cool man with plenty of nerve, one accustomed to depend upon mine folk, and make explorations in shaft, tunnel, and boring, deep down in the earth. Besides, Clive Reed's brain was too busy

as he looked around him, noting some fifty feet down that a great vein of lead ore had been extracted from the solid rock, leaving a narrow passage going off at right angles. Another ran in an opposite direction, and soon after he passed another, just as if they were branches of some great root which he was tracing to its end.

About a hundred feet down, where the light shone now clearly, he dislodged a loose stone, which went on before him with a rushing, rumbling sound, ending in a sullen plunge into the water far below.

"All right?" came from above, the words descending the shaft, and sounding like a strange whisper magnified and uttered close to his ear.

"Yes; lower away."

The rope glided on round the bar; and Reed went on down and down, noting the differences in the formations as well as the crumbling, dripping stone would allow, and mentally planning out fresh drifts here and there, where he expected to find paying ore, till he found himself opposite to a great cavernous opening, black and forbidding-looking enough to repel any one wanting in nerve, while from far below came a gleam of light, apparently reflected from the water.

"Hold hard! Haul up four feet!"

Reed's words went echoing to the surface, and were promptly attended to.

"Now hold fast!"

The next minute he gave himself a swing, and obtained foothold in the great cave whose bottom was worn hollow by the trickling of a tiny stream which drained into the lower part of the shaft, and after throwing off the rope and shouting to the men to haul up, he stood holding the light above his head, examining the roof and sides, while he waited for the descent of his companion; but here the ore seemed to have been chipped and picked out to the last fragment.

Sturgess joined him at the end of a few minutes, took the lanthorn, opened it so as to get as much light as possible, and then turned to Reed.

"Same way again, sir?"

"No; we'll try that gallery off to the left. That third one I noticed last time."

"Why, that's right half a mile away, and goes to nowhere. That's never been worked."

Reed faced round to him sharply.

"Do you object to your job, my man?" he said; "because if so, speak at once, and send down one of the others."

"Oh, I don't object," said the man surlily. "I'll go where you won't get them to venture. I was thinking about you."

"Then don't think about me, but about your duties."

"That's all right enough, sir; only if a regular consulting engineer came down, he'd chip off a bit here, and a bit there, and know directly what a mine's worth. I took stock of this old place last time, and can tell you now without your troubling yourself

to go a step farther. 'Sides, I've been down since."

"Indeed!"

"Oh yes. I'd nothing to do, so it was natural I should come down and have a look of the property I was to take care of."

"Well, and what estimate did you set on it – as to value?" said Reed, with a smile.

"Oh, about the usual figure," said the man, with a peculiar laugh. "It's worth just as much as you can get out of your shareholders."

"Yes?"

"That's it, sir; I've not been busy over mines ten years for nothing. Not a penny more. The old folks cleared it out clean enough, all but the patch to the right down yonder."

"Then you think the whole thing is a swindle, Mr Sturgess, eh?"

"Oh no, sir. I don't say that," replied the man, with a chuckle. "I only say it's a mine as will show up well when it has got all its new machinery. Ought to make a good job for a couple of years for a few people. Shall I show you where you can get a few good specimens? I know of some bits as are pretty rich."

"No, thank you," said Reed quietly. "I'm not a regular consulting engineer, my man, and we came down to do a good day's exploring. I want to see the whole of the workings."

"Then it'll take you a week, sir."

"Very well, then, let it take me a week. Now, then, let's waste no more time."

Michael Sturgess uttered a sound something like a grunt, and holding the lantern before him led on along the rocky cavernous passage, which was wonderfully free from fallen stones, the rock having formed endless pillar buttresses and arch-like processes of stalactitic growth, cementing and holding all firmly together.

But there was a wonderful sameness as they went on, following the course of what had once been a lode of ore, which had finally been cleared out, leaving its shape in the rock, and forming a tunnel as the ancient miners worked their way.

Far down the main gallery of the mine Sturgess paused by a narrow rift four or five feet across, and running up to nothing some fifteen feet overhead. The rock was different here, being a mass of cemented together fragments of the old geological stone lilies, and looked as if some modern shock had riven the place in two, for the lines on either side suggested that if compressed they would still fit together.

"Mean to go along here, sir?" said Sturgess, holding up the lanthorn, so as to display the stone of which the sides were formed.

"Yes; go on," said Reed shortly.

"There's been no working here, sir; this is all natural split in the rock."

"I am perfectly aware of that, and we are wasting time."

"Oh, all right, sir," said the man surlily, and he strode in through the opening, walking as fast as he could, like a sulky, offended schoolboy, for a few dozen yards; but this soon came

to an end, for in place of a regular beaten well-used way, they were now compelled to pick their path over broken marble, loose angular masses, and the accumulated débris which had fallen from above, while in places they had to stride from side to side of a narrow crevice which ran straight down.

But the place attracted Clive Reed as they went on and on, with the rift they traversed growing wider, and opening out into a cavern now, or contracting again, till in places their passage was so narrow that they had to squeeze through into curious-looking chambers in the rock. Then the way split and branched off into different passages, suggestive of endless labyrinths leading right away through the untrodden bowels of the earth. Below them in one place ran a good-sized stream, unseen as it threaded its way among the broken stones, but making its presence known by its musical gurgling, till, after they had been walking above it for about ten minutes, Sturgess stood still, holding up the light at the edge of a gulf, down which the water plunged with a dull, hissing roar.

"Won't go no farther this way, I suppose, sir?" he said, rather mockingly.

Reed made no reply, but stepped forward close to the man's side, shaded his eyes, and peered into darkness, which he could not pierce.

He stooped to pick up a stone and hurl it outward, and listened till it fell and splintered, and the fragments went rattling down for some distance, before the noise they made was overcome by

the roar of the water.

"Along here," said Reed at last, and he pointed to his left.

Sturgess hesitated for a few moments, and then began to move cautiously along the side of the vast cavern, a place apparently untouched, and very rarely, if ever, visited by man.

At last he stopped short.

"I don't want to show no white feathers, Mr Reed, sir," he said, "but our candles'll only last a certain time, and we've got to get back."

"I have matches and three candles in my pocket," said the young engineer quietly.

"But I don't know whether I can find my way back, sir, now; whilst if we go any farther, I'm sure I can't."

"I have it all perfectly impressed on my brain," said Reed quietly. "But I do not want to go much farther. I only want to examine the rock here and there. Take care, man: mind!"

He darted out his right hand, caught the miner by the coat and saved him from plunging down into the black abyss beneath them, for in taking a step forward, Sturgess had trodden on a piece of loose shell marble, which gave way and one foot went down.

He dropped the lanthorn, though, and it went below, to hang in a crevice upon its side, threatening to go out; but as soon as Sturgess had a little recovered himself and sat down to start wiping his forehead, Reed began to descend.

"Don't do that, sir," cried Sturgess hoarsely. "Light your

candle."

"No; I can get the lanthorn," said Reed quietly; and he went on descending cautiously till, getting well hold of the nearest projecting fragment with his left hand, he bent down lower and lower to try and reach the handle of their lamp.

But, try how he would, it was always a few inches beyond his reach; and at last, with the candle within guttering, flaring, and blackening the glass, threatening to crack it and then go out, Reed drew himself up again to try and get a fresh footing upon the side of the chasm.

He looked up to see, faintly, a white face gazing down at him, and, as their eyes met, the man said hoarsely —

"Don't do that, sir. Come up and light a fresh bit. If you slip, I shall be all in darkness. It's horrid to have to come to one's end in a place like this."

"Sympathy for himself, and not for me," thought Reed. "I have the lights."

Just at that moment he noted something just level with where he stood, where there was a plain demarcation between two kinds of stone; and, whereas on the left all was shelly fossil, on his right it was limestone; and again, with a sparkling and gem-like vein of quartz full of great crystals of galena.

"Do you hear, sir? Come back here, and let's get out of this," cried Sturgess again. "It arn't fair to a man to bring him into such a hole. This isn't a mine."

"My good fellow," said Reed quietly, "you are alarming

yourself about nothing. I can get the lanthorn directly, and it is a pity to leave it here."

The miner uttered a hoarse sigh which was almost a groan, and crouched on the rugged shelf, looking down with starting eyes, as Reed glanced quickly once more at the face of the rock, and then, taking fast hold of another projection, he tried again to get a little lower, and had looked beyond the lanthorn, to see that he was on a very rapid slope, going down to unknown depths for aught that he could tell; for all below the dim light was black – a terrible void, out of which came the splash and roar of falling water.

He could not help a shudder as his mind raised up horrors in connection with that black darkness, and the possibility of his falling and going down and down into some rushing water which was waiting to bear him away.

But it was only a momentary nervousness. Then he smiled to himself, and thought of home and of Janet Praed – how horrified she would be if she could see him then.

"And nothing whatever to mind but imaginary fears," he said to himself.

"Stop a minute, sir," came in a hoarse whisper from above. "Give me the matches and candles, and I'll strike another light."

"And then I go to perdition for aught you care," thought Clive Reed. "No, hang me if I do."

He took no notice of the appeal, but lowered one foot, got a fresh hold, bent towards the lanthorn, extending his arm to the

utmost, touched the handle, but it moved an inch, a stone broke from where he was standing, to go down with a rattle, and then, to the young man's dismay, the lanthorn began to glide.

It was all in a moment. He bent down lower and made a sudden snatch, his left hand slipped from its hold, and he was falling, but in that brief instant he grasped the lanthorn. The next it was beneath him, the light was out, and with a rush of dislodged stones he felt himself rushing rapidly down the cavern side with the water roaring loudly in his ears, but pierced by a cry that robbed him of all power as thoroughly | as if he had received a paralytic stroke.

Chapter Six.
The Lead of Lead

"Ahoy there! Sturgess! Are you hurt?"

"Hurt, sir? No."

"Then don't make that noise, man. Any one would think you were a child, frightened at the dark."

"But where are you, sir?"

"Down here, of course."

"I thought you were killed, sir, and – and – "

"That you were left alone in the dark, man. There, wait till I get a light."

Michael Sturgess muttered an oath, and leaned forward over the sharp slope, as he wiped the great drops of fear-born perspiration from his face. "Child, am I?" he muttered. "I'll let him see. Enough to scare anybody – place like this."

He gazed downward as Reed, after a little manipulation of the damaged lanthorn, struck a light, which gleamed out some sixty feet below. Then the candle was relit, giving the man a faint glimpse of the horrible-looking slope, and lastly Reed began to climb up, slowly talking the while. "Of course it's an ugly-looking place," he said; "these underground limestone caverns always are, but it's of no use to lose your nerve at the first emergency."

There was a good-humoured contempt in the young engineer's

tones which enraged the big strong man above him as he stood looking down at the light.

"Like to scare him!" he muttered, as Reed climbed higher, rested when about half-way up, and raised the lanthorn above his head to gaze at the rock face before him, as if seeking for a good hand or foot hold.

"I daresay this place goes down for far enough," he said, as he continued his climb, and kept on talking as if to take his companion's attention; "it would be interesting to try and plumb the depth."

"Shall I take the lanthorn?" said Sturgess, a minute or two later.

"No, thanks, I'll carry it," replied Reed, as he made his way to where Sturgess stood. "I shall want to look at the walls here and there as we go back. There! might have been worse. A bit scratched, and my clothes a little torn. I will go back to the regular old workings now. There has evidently never been anything done here."

"No, sir; what I told you. No good here."

"No good!" said Reed, with a laugh. "I think there's a great deal of good."

"What, workable stuff, sir?" said the man sharply. "Perhaps; but what I meant was this tremendous hole and the water. Why, Sturgess, man, it's worth thousands."

"Don't see it, sir," said the man roughly.

"I do. A natural drainage of the mine. No expenditure for

keeping the workings dry."

"Oh, yes, that's right enough, sir," said the man, with a laugh, "if you've got anything to work."

"I'm afraid Mr Sturgess and I will not get on together," said Reed to himself, as he led the way on, examining the wall from time to time, and now and then chipping off a piece for a specimen.

"If this cockney jockey's going to be over me," muttered Sturgess, "he's got to be tough; but he don't know everything."

They reached the entrance to the grotto-like portion of the mine, where Reed halted, took out a sandwich-box and flask, and began to refresh himself, handing both to his companion first; and as Reed ate, he lifted the lanthorn from time to time, and examined the neighbouring walls, roof, and floor.

"All pretty well cleared out, sir," said Sturgess, with a grin.

"Yes – clean," replied Reed quietly; and soon after they resumed their exploration, following the track of the old veins here and there through an almost interminable maze of passages, and going farther and farther into the depths of the mountain. But it was always the same, passage after passage through the limestone, following the old lode of lead ore which had been diligently quarried and picked out any time during, probably, the past two thousand years, and there was no plan, no special arrangement in driving the various tunnels. Where nature had run her mineral in veins, there the old miners had followed; and, as Reed had noticed before, there was scarcely a passage that

had water lying about, the drippings from the roof and cracks in the walls having worn for themselves little channels, which found their way into others, and then by degrees went to swell the fall by whose side he had stood some hours before.

At last, with his bag growing heavy with specimens, and the supply of candles getting less, and after the termination of the workings had been found and examined in several places, Reed stopped.

"Back now," he said.

"Satisfied, sir?"

"Oh yes, for to-day. I shall follow the other leads, of course, till I have well examined all, and mapped it out."

"And settled where you shall begin work, sir," said the man, with a grin.

"Oh, I have settled that," replied Reed.

Sturgess stared.

"Been a lot of good stuff got out of here, sir, no doubt."

"Evidently."

"More than there ever will be again."

"That's more than we can say, Sturgess. Take the lanthorn now, and lead on straight for the mouth. Good heavens! Why, it's five o'clock."

"Yes, sir, I thought it must be," said the man.

"Time goes when one is interested. There, have a cigar. Light up. We have not done a bad's day work. Can you lead back pretty straight?"

"Oh yes, sir, I can manage that," said the man confidently; but he had been trudging along, sending his and the young man's shadows grotesquely dancing upon the roof for quite an hour and a half before the end of the main artery of the mine was reached, with the sloping shaft up to the daylight – "to grass," Sturgess termed it – but here there was no response to their hails for nearly an hour, the men having gone.

"The scoundrels!" Reed cried at last. "Well, it's risky work, but we can't stop down here. We must either go back into the mine, try for the other shaft, which may be climbable, or you or I must go up that rope."

"Who's to climb a rope like that, sir?" growled Sturgess; "and how do we know that the end's properly fastened? – There they are!"

For a faint murmur of voices was heard from far above, and now an answer came to their hail, and a minute later a voice shouted —

"All right below?"

"Yes," cried Reed. "Get in the loop, my man. – Ahoy there! haul up."

The rope tightened and Sturgess was raised from his feet and went up slowly, leaving Reed below in the darkness.

But it was all light to the young engineer, whose tired face shone with joy and excitement.

"The blind cavern lizards," he said, half aloud. "I knew it. God bless the old dad, what a brain he has! He'll be delighted with

my report; and Janet, my darling, you shall have a home that will be the envy of all we know, and make the old Doctor proud of us. My darling!" he said softly, as, with his eyes half closed, he raised up her fair young face before him. "Hah! poor old Jessop, too. He must have a bit of the luck. I'll tell the old man bygones must be bygones. We'll have a clean slate. Jess isn't a bad fellow after all. I might have gone down the wrong road a bit if it hadn't been for Janet. Hang it all! the love of a dear sweet girl does keep a weak fellow straight."

He glanced down at his hands and tweed suit, daubed with limestone mud, and showing a couple of tears in the stout cloth.

"Delightful party for a drawing-room, and – hullo! here's the loop."

He secured the rope, which came dangling down, felt that his specimens and tools were safe, and then slipped the loop over his head, sat in it as nonchalantly as if it had been a swing, uttered a loud "All right," and the next minute he was being steadily hauled up towards the surface.

Chapter Seven.
Making Friends

"Hallo, my lads!" cried Reed, as he reached terra firma and gazed around. "I didn't know there was a public-house handy."

"No, no, don't blame the poor lads," said a well-dressed, elderly man, smiling. "They were alarmed at your long absence, sir, and came on to me for help. We came round, and picked up these two brave fellows, and were ready for a search, but, thank heaven, it was a false alarm."

"Oh, that was it?" cried Reed; "then I beg your pardon, my lads, and thank you, sir, heartily. Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

"Major Gurdon, at your service, sir," and there was a swift military drawing up of the spare figure, the soft dark eyes brightened up, and the speaker threw back his grey head and gave his long white beard a shake to settle it upon his breast.

"Mr Reed, I believe, the new engineer of the mine?"

"Yes, sir, but at this present moment more like one of the miners," said Reed, with a deprecating glance at his besmirched garments. "Excuse me one moment."

He turned to the men with his hand in his pocket – a hand that did not come back empty, and the new-comers went off slowly, smiling as Reed turned now to the Major, who had stepped

forward, eager to speak.

"You look thoroughly exhausted," he said quickly. "I live quite a cottage life out here with my garden and fishing-rod, but if you will accept my hospitality, such as it is – "

"Really, I could not trouble you – and in this condition," began Reed, as Sturgess changed colour, and an unpleasant scowl came upon his face.

"You will be conferring a favour, my dear sir," said the Major. "One does not often have the society of a gentleman out in this wild place; and," he added laughingly, "the hospitality will embrace soap and water and a clothes-brush."

"Then I accept willingly," said Reed, holding out his hand, but withdrawing it directly as he noted its condition, covered with dried limestone mud, and streaked in two places with blood.

"Nonsense!" said the Major, taking the hand. "I understand these things, my dear sir. I often go prowling about with a geologist's hammer, and have gone home like this. Come along. My high tea will be about ready."

"Well, this is most unexpected," said Reed warmly. "Here, Sturgess, I shall come over again to-morrow about eleven. Be here with the men, and you had better bring a couple of lanthorns."

"Hadn't I better come on to put you in the right road?"

"What! Oh, no! I shall manage. That will do." The man turned away with the look upon his countenance intensifying; but it was not observed, for Reed walked off in company with his new

acquaintance, the pair chatting away as if they had known each other for years.

"Quite gave me a scare," said the Major. "Life here is so uneventful. Very beautiful, but lonely, especially in the winter."

"But you do not stay here in the winter?"

"Oh yes; I have lived here ten years now."

"No accounting for taste," thought Reed; and he glanced sidewise at his companion, but learned nothing. He only saw a quiet-looking country gentleman, whose sun-browned face told of an open-air life.

Sturgess followed them to the great natural gateway at the end of the chasm, where he had stood some days before, but not alone; and he now remained watching them as they went on westward along the narrow path, and round by the huge buttress formed by the refuse of the mine, carried and cast down there for hundreds upon hundreds of years. Then as they passed on out of sight, the man raised one of his fingers to his lips, and began gnawing roughly at the side of the nail, till he seemed to make up his mind, and took a step or two forward after them, next stopped short again, for a hail came from behind.

"Coming on down to the village, Mr Sturgess?"

He turned and faced one of the two men, and nodded, walking away with him in the other direction, taciturn and strange, answering his companion in monosyllables, and with his thoughts evidently far away. Not so very, though, for they were with Clive Reed, and promised him no good.

"So you have been examining the old 'White Virgin' mine, eh?" said Major Gurdon. "I heard it was sold. A new company, eh?"

"Yes," said Reed, smiling; "a new company – a solid one."

"Eh? I hope so. But if I had to go in for a mining adventure, I think I should begin here with the material the old miners cast away as rubbish." He pointed to the great buttress they were skirting. "There it is, already extracted from the mountain, and though poor, rich enough, I should say, to pay a company if worked with modern appliances."

"You understand these things?" said Reed, looking at his elderly companion searchingly, and noting how deeply lined his brow seemed, and that care and sorrow more than age had given him his hollow-cheeked, anxious air.

"A man who likes geology, mineralogy, and who always lives among these hills, cannot help picking up a little mining lore," said the Major, with a smile. "I have searched and toiled, my dear sir – much loss and little gain. I hope yours may prove to be a successful venture."

"Let's hope so," said Reed quietly. "All mining is speculative, and in speculative matters there must be losses as well as gains."

"And after all, what does it amount to, my young friend? The chase of a will o' the wisp who bears a golden lamp not worth the winning, you will say when you grow as old as I. But there, I shall bore you with this twaddle. What do you say to that for a view? Derbyshire in front; broad, honest, hardworking old Yorkshire

away to your right; at your feet the Swirl – my river, I call it."

"A lovely prospect, but rather wild," said Reed, smiling.

"Say savage, and you will be nearer the truth; but I can show you something a little less stern;" and, chatting away pleasantly, he led on along first one slope and then another, till at last they came down upon a narrow track beside a rippling stream, shut in between two perpendicular walls of rock, draped with ivy, and with every cleft and crevice green and bright with trailing birch, moss, and clustering fern.

The water of the little river ran swiftly babbling here among the rocks, there swirling round, eddying and forming whirlpools, one of which, across the river where it washed the perpendicular rock, was evidently very deep, for the water gradually subsided there and grew still and glassy, reflecting the ivy-curtained walls as it slowly glided round.

"Ah! this is delightful," cried Reed, as he stopped to gaze at the glancing waters, where the sun made the ripples dazzling to the eye, and then turned to the deep shadows. "Eden may have been lovely, but this would be good enough for a poor commonplace nineteenth-century fellow like myself."

"You like it?" said the Major, smiling.

"It's glorious. Is there much of it like this?"

"About a mile. I call it my river here, and the mining men respect my rights generally – that is, unless the trout they catch sight of in some pool is a very fat one indeed."

He said this with a peculiar smile, as he met Reed's eye.

"Not bad fellows, the miners, but I don't quite take to your guardian of the mine."

"I suppose not," said Reed. "He is rather a rough customer, but he was recommended to my father for his knowledge of underground work. – You have plenty of trout here, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, and I take toll of them all along this stretch of river. Possession is nine points of the law, but I really have only my right on one side as far as my bit of property extends."

"Ah! you have an estate along here?"

"Yes, and I am glad to meet my neighbours, sir. My rough piece of mountain is bounded by the river along here from the corner we just passed, and on another side by the mine land of your Company – the old 'White Virgin' estate. A worthless stretch of barren rock and ravine; but I bought it for the sake of this piece of river fifteen years ago. A place to retire to, my dear sir, suitable for a man weary of the world, and one of whom the world had had enough."

His face was overcast as he spoke, and he frowned heavily, while Reed noticed the sad, careworn aspect of the man, who looked as if he had suffered from some terrible trouble – that which had so deeply lined his face. But it brightened up again directly, as Reed hung back to admire the lovely meandering stream.

"You do like it?" said the Major.

"Like it, my dear sir! If I were not a busy man, bound to go on carving my way, it is just the place where I should like to come

and dream away my days."

"Do you care for fishing?"

"Oh yes."

"Then, as we are neighbours, if you come much to the mine, I shall at any time be glad to show you a few good places where you can throw a fly."

"Some day I shall certainly ask you," said Reed frankly; "not often, I have no time."

"Whenever you like, and you will be welcome, Mr Reed; for – excuse me – I like you."

"So soon," said Reed, raising his eyebrows.

"The liking of one man for another comes at once, sir, I think, and seldom errs," said the Major gravely. "You will be welcome if you can content yourself with cottage fare and our simplicity. This is my little home."

Reed stopped short astonished, for they had turned a sharp corner of the rugged wall of rock which towered up, and came suddenly upon a sheltered nook, which ran from the river-side right up into the mountains. There was but one level space of about half an acre; the rest was knoll, crag, mound, and rift, a natural garden full of waving birch, shrubs, evergreens, and flowers all growing in wild luxuriance, with myrtle, fuchsia, hydrangea, and geranium, developing into trees more than plants, showing how sheltered the place must be, how warm and suited to their lives. There was no ugly fence, but moss and ivy covered walls of rugged stone, placed here and there as a protection

from wandering sheep, while on the level patch, quaintly built of limestone, thatched, porched with rugged wood, its windows embayed, and the whole covered with wistaria, myrtle, and creeping plants, which fought for a hold upon the walls, stood a cottage, out of whose porch Dinah Gurdon, pale of face, anxious-looking, and troubled, came slowly down.

"Welcome to the wilderness, Mr Reed," said the Major, smiling sadly, as he noted the young man's enthusiastic look of admiration; and then frowning slightly as he saw a wondering look when the figure in white came toward them from the porch. "My daughter, sir. Dinah, my child, I bring a guest to partake of our poor hospitality this evening. Don't look so pale and frightened, my dear. Mr Reed is, I am glad to say, a deceiver. There was no cause for alarm, and his aspect is only due to a long journey underground. He is not hurt."

"I – I am very glad," said Dinah, holding out her hand, which was eagerly taken, and then shrinking as she encountered Clive Reed's eager look. "The men brought such startling news."

"That we were prepared to turn your bedroom into a cottage hospital, Mr Reed, and send off twelve miles for a doctor," said the Major, as he saw his child's large dark eyes sink beneath their visitor's gaze, and a couple of red spots begin to glow in her pale cheeks. "Now, Dinah, my child, Mr Reed must be shown to his room, and let's have your colour back. My daughter is a little unwell, Mr Reed. She was crossing the mountain the other day, coming back from Bedale, and as she passed over one of the

ragged pieces by your mine, she had an ugly fall."

"Not serious, I hope?" said Reed, with a look of interest, and his searching eyes once more met those of the pale, intense countenance before them, eyes so full of shrinking horror and fear, that though he could not read them, Clive Reed wondered at their expression, as a flow of crimson suffused the cheeks, rising right up to the forehead, and then died out, leaving the girl deadly pale.

The Major waited, as if expecting that his child would speak, but as she remained silent, he said gravely —

"No; she assures me that it was not serious, but she came back looking horribly startled. It was quite a shock to the system, from which she has not quite recovered yet. Now, Mr Reed, Martha will show you your room."

Reed took a step forward, to find Martha, the hardest-looking, harshest-faced woman of forty he had ever seen, waiting to lead the way.

"A fall," he said, as he stood alone in the prettily furnished bedroom: "alone in the mountains, and no one by to help. I wish I had been there – with Janet, too, of course."

Dinah Gurdon was at that moment indulging in similar thoughts – naturally omitting Janet – and as she stood nearly opposite a glass, she became aware of her face reflected there, when she turned away with a shiver.

Chapter Eight.
Undermining

"Hallo, Jess, you here?" cried Clive, as he suddenly encountered his brother at Dr Praed's door in Russell Square.

Jessop Reed started, and in spite of his man-about-town confidence, he looked for the moment confused, but recovered himself directly.

"Might say the same to you," he retorted. "I thought you were down some hole in the Midlands."

"But I've come up again. Just got here from St. Pancras now. I say, though, what is it? Out of sorts – been to see the Doctor?"

"Eh? Oh no. I'm all right. But I'm in a hurry. See you at dinner."

"Why, what's the matter with him?" thought Clive, as his brother hurried away. "Fast life, I suppose. I'll run in and ask the Doctor before I go up."

He rang; the Doctor's confidential man opened the door, and stood back for him to enter.

"Patient with the Doctor, Morgan?"

"No, sir; past his time. Gone on to the hospital. Back soon."

Clive stared.

"Miss Praed's in the drawing-room, sir."

"Oh, all right. I'll go up," said Clive; and he began to ascend

two steps at a time. “I hope Jess isn’t ill. Disappointed, I suppose, at finding the old man out.” – “Ah, Janet, darling,” he cried, as he entered the drawing-room, to find his fiancée standing with a bouquet in her hand, looking dreamy and thoughtful.

She flushed up as he caught her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, and then frowned slightly, and put on the pouting look of a spoiled child.

“Why, what a bonnie bunch of roses!” he cried. “Let’s have one for a button-hole.”

“No, no,” she said hastily, and a pained look of perplexity crossed Clive’s countenance as she held the bouquet from him. Then with forced playfulness, “Mustn’t be touched.”

“All right,” he cried merrily. “I came round this way so as to see you first, pet. Raced up by the early train this morning.”

“Indeed!” said Janet, raising her eyebrows; “been in Derbyshire, have you not?”

“My darling!”

“Well, one knows so little of your movements now.”

“Oh, I say, Janet dear, don’t be hard upon a poor busy fellow. You know why I am away so much. All for your sake, pet,” he whispered earnestly; “to make ourselves thoroughly independent, and you a home of which you may be proud.”

There was a slight catching in Janet Praed’s breath, as she said jerkily, and with a show of flippancy, to hide the emotion from which she suffered, for self-accusation was busy with her just then, and a pang or two shot through her as she contrasted the

frank, honest manner of her betrothed, and his words, so full of simple honest affection, with others to which she had in a foolish, half-jealous spirit listened again and again —

"Oh yes, I know," she said, curling up her pretty lip, and speaking hastily to hide her feelings; "but you might have called."

"Now, Janet, love, don't tease me. How could I, dear?"

"Well, then, you might have written. A whole week away and not a line."

"Gently, my own darling, judge, guide, and counsellor in one," he cried warmly. "I might have written, and ought to have written, but I have been, oh so busy all day, and when I got back to quarters, there was the Major to talk to me, and I could not slight Miss Gurdon."

"The Major – Miss Gurdon? May I ask who these people are?"

"Oh, a very jolly old sort of fellow, who lives close to the mine, with an only daughter. He insisted upon my staying there while I was down, and I wasn't sorry; for – O Janet! let me whisper it in your lovely little shell of an ear," he continued playfully – "the miner's cottage I slept at one night was not comfortable; it was grubby, and oh, those fleas! If it had not been for my stout walking-stick – "

"What sort of a person is Miss Gurdon?" said Janet, interrupting him quickly.

"Oh, very nice and ladylike."

"Pretty?"

"Pretty! Well, you would hardly call it pretty. A sad, pensive

face, very sweet and delicate, and with the look of one who had known trouble. There seemed to be some secret about father and daughter."

"Oh!" said Janet softly, and the colour came into her cheeks very warmly. "And you were very comfortable there?"

"Yes, very," said Clive emphatically.

"Too comfortable to remember me and write, of course."

"O Janet, my darling!" he said tenderly, as he passed his arm about her waist, "how can you be such a jealous little thing! As if I could think of any one but you. You were with me night and day. It was always what is Janet doing? how does she look? and is she thinking of me? Whether I was scrambling about down in the mine like a mud-lark, or more decent and talking to Miss Gurdon of an evening in their tiny drawing-room."

"About me, of course," said Janet coldly.

"No, dear," said Clive innocently, "I never mentioned your name. I dared not, pet, for fear they should laugh at me, and think what a great goose I was. For I am, pet. Once I begin talking to any one about you, I can't leave off."

"Indeed!" she said sarcastically.

"Why, Janet, dear," he said earnestly, and he tried to take her hand, "what have I said or done? Surely you don't think – Oh, my love, my dear love!" he cried, with his voice growing deep and earnest, "how can you be so ready to take pique over such trifles! Janet, I love you with all my heart, dear. I have not a thought that is not for my own darling."

"No, no; don't touch me," she panted, as he drew her towards him.

"I will – I will, darling wifie to be; but you must master these little bits of uncalled-for jealousy, dear. They are not fair to me, and next time I am away I will at any cost write to you, even if the business fails, and – "

"Scoundrel! ruffian! how dare you put your arm around my daughter, sir? She is not your wife yet."

The words came so fiercely and suddenly that Clive started away, and Janet hurriedly escaped to the other side of the chair. For the Doctor had bustled in just as Clive was trying to take the kiss withheld from him, and now stood there with a terrific frown upon his heavy grey brow.

The next moment he had burst into a hearty roar of laughter.

"Nice guilty pair you look," he cried. "Ah! you may well turn red, you unblushing puss! Eh? No, that won't do, it's a bull. And you, sir, how dare – Well, how are you, Clive, my boy? Came round here first, eh? I called at Guildford Street as I went to the hospital, and they hadn't heard of you."

"Yes, I was obliged to come here first," said Clive.

"Of course. That's right. Janet has been looking pale since you went. Come and dine to-night, and don't let me come in here and catch you behaving in that rude way again."

"Papa, for shame!" cried Janet, and she hurried out of the room.

The Doctor laughed.

"Well," he cried eagerly, "what about the mine? – is it good?"

"For your ears only, Doctor," said Clive, "in confidence?"

"On my honour, my dear boy," said Dr Praed gravely.

"Then you may invest as much as you like, sir."

"Not a company dodge?"

"The mine teems with ore, sir. I have thoroughly examined it, and found out a new, enormously rich lode."

"Then it's quite safe?"

"Safe as the Bank of England, sir, and the dad will be a millionaire."

"Ah! I wish he would be a healthy man, instead of a wealthy," said the Doctor.

"Oh, you don't think – you have not found him worse?"

"I don't like his looks, Clive, my boy," said the Doctor; "and I beg that you will try to save him from all emotion. This great accession of wealth will do him no good, and – yes; what? – I didn't ring."

"Messenger, sir," said the Doctor's man, with grave earnestness and a sharp glance at Clive. "From Mr Reed's, sir – sudden attack, and will you come at once." Then in a hurried whisper, "Dying!"

But it sounded in trumpet-tones in Clive Reed's ear, as with a sharp cry he sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens!" he said, "and I came on here!"

"Hush!" said the Doctor sternly. "Here, Morgan, the carriage?"

“At the door, sir.”
The Doctor nodded as he drew Clive’s arm through his own.
“Do not fear the worst,” he whispered; “I may save him yet.”

Chapter Nine.
Two Days Earlier

"Well, what news?" said Wrigley, as Jessop Reed entered his gloomy office. "Bah! what a dandy you are! Why, you spend enough on barbers and buttonholes to keep you from borrowing money."

"And you spend enough on ballet-girls to keep you from making profits by lending," retorted Jessop. "All right, my Jonathan," said Wrigley.

"All right, my David," replied Jessop. "Let me see: David was a Jew."

"Whilst I am not," said Wrigley sharply.

"Oh, of course not. No one would suppose Wrigley to be an Israelitish name. There, don't set up all your feathers, man, and look so indignant because I suggested that you belonged to the chosen race. There are good Jews."

"And precious bad Christians," said Wrigley sourly.

"Awfully! But I say, don't be so ruffled, man. Lucky I didn't come for some hard coin this morning."

"It is; and hang me if I ever lend you money again if I've to have blood thrown in my face."

"Bah! you shouldn't be so sensitive about it. I don't mind about your descent."

"Enough to make any man sensitive. Gad, sir, any one would think we were lepers, seeing the treatment we receive."

"Yes, it's too bad," said Jessop soothingly; "but you do have your recompense, old man. Nice refined revenge your people have had for the insult and contempt they have met with. There, let's talk business."

"Yes, let's talk business. Now, then, what about the hole in the earth down which people throw their money?"

"Well, it's a big hole."

"Yes, I know that, but is it a big do after all?"

"No. As I told you, the old man wouldn't have gone in for it if it hadn't been right."

"Then he really does hold a great deal in it?"

"More than half, that I know of."

"You've carefully made sure of that."

"Yes, carefully. It's all right, I tell you."

"Good! And what about the dear brother?"

"He's still down there."

"Surveying the mine?"

"Surveying? He has been down it every day for nearly a week, examining every crack and corner – adit, winze, shaft, driving, all the whole lot of it."

"Well?"

"He sends reports to the old man every night."

"And what does he say? Do you know?"

"Yes; the old man reads them to me."

"Fudge! Flams to rig the market. Chatter for you to spread on the Stock Exchange and make the shares go up."

"No," said Jessop quietly, as he sat on a corner of the lawyer's table, and swung his cane and one leg to and fro. "The dad and I don't hit it, and we've had more quarrels than I can count about money and – other little matters; but he's always straightforward with me over business, and I'd trust his word sooner than any man's in London."

"Good son."

"Ah! you needn't sneer; you'd only be too glad to get his name to a bit of paper."

"True, O king! He is a model that way. But then he is pretty warm, and can afford to lose."

"Yes; but it would be the same if he were hard up. The old man's dead square."

"Then you believe your brother's reports are all that are read to you?"

"Implicitly."

"No garbling, you think?"

"I'm sure there isn't. No, old fellow, I hate my fortunate brother most bitterly, and I don't love my father; but I'd sooner take their word than that of any one I know."

"Humph!" ejaculated the lawyer. "Well, then, the mine is not quite played out!"

"Played out! Pish! It has never been worked properly. Only scratched and scraped. There's plenty of ore to pay by following

on the old workings with modern tackle, and a little fortune in re-smelting the old refuse that has been accumulating for fifteen hundred or two thousand years."

"Yes, it is very old," said Wrigley thoughtfully.

"Old! Why, no one knows how old it is. The Romans worked it, and I daresay the Phoenicians had a finger in it before them."

"Go on, old fellow," said Wrigley, laughing. "Can you prove that pigs of lead were got from it to ballast the ark?"

"Well, you needn't believe it without you like."

"But I do believe a great deal of it. There'll be quite enough for us, if you mean business."

"If I mean business! Why, of course I do. Do you suppose I am going to sit still and let my brother have all the cream of life? He'll get all the old man's money. Plenty without that. I'm not blind. Precious little for me there."

"Then what is going to be done?"

"They are going to set to work directly. My brother has laid his reports before the board. I did not tell you that he has discovered a new untouched lode that promises to yield wonderfully."

"Indeed!" said Wrigley – "a new lode?" and he looked searchingly at his companion.

"Yes; an important vein of ore that promises to be of immense value."

"Hah! that sounds well," said Wrigley.

"For the shareholders?"

"No; for us. Have you forgotten?"

"No," said Jessop gloomily, "but will it work?"

"Work? You, an old hand, and ask that. My dear Jessop, if we cannot work that between us it is strange."

"Yes, but the money necessary. It will be enormous."

"Pretty well, my dear boy," said Wrigley, with quiet confidence; "but don't you fidget about that. Millions are to be had for a safe thing, so we need not be scared about thousands. Yes; that new vein will do. Jessop, my lad, you and I must work that vein. The idea of the great lode is glorious and makes our task easy in that direction; but there is a stumbling-block elsewhere – a difficulty in the way."

"I don't understand you," said Jessop testily. "Hang it, man! Don't be so mysterious. Now then, please, what do you mean?"

"Let me take my own pace, my dear Jessop, as the inventor of our fortune."

"Anyhow you like, but let me see how we are going."

"Well, then, you shall. Now, then, we want an enemy. Clive Reed's or your father's enemy. Has your brother any?"

"Yes; here he is, confound him!"

"And you will not do, my dear boy! Besides, it would not be your work. I meant some man who dislikes him so consumedly that he would not stick at trifles for the sake of revenge – and hard cash. What is more," continued Wrigley, as Jessop shook his head, "it must be some one connected with the mine."

"Bah! How can it be, when the mine is not started?"

"Then it must be as soon as possible after the mine has been

started. Some workman under him in a position of trust, whom he has injured: struck him, taken his wife or sweetheart, mortally injured in some way."

Jessop burst into a coarse laugh, and Wrigley looked at him inquiringly.

"My dear boy," said the stockbroker, "I thought this was to be a matter of finessing and making a few thousands."

"It is, and of making a good many thousands."

"And you talk as if it were a plot for an Adelphi drama. My dear fellow, my brother Clive is a sort of nineteenth-century saint – not the cad in a play. Clive doesn't drink, bet, nor gamble in any way. He is a good boy, who is engaged, and goes to church regularly with the lady."

"Oh, yes; that's as far as you know now."

"I do know," cried Jessop. "Clive has never run away with any one's wife, nor bullied men, nor gone to the – your friends for coin. If you can't hit out a better way than that, we may pitch the thing up."

"At the first difficulty?" said Wrigley, smiling. "No, my boy. We want such a man as I have described – a man whose opinion about the mine will be worth taking. He must, as I say, hate your brother sufficiently to give that opinion when we want it, so as to say check to your brother and be believed."

"Well, then, there isn't such a man," said Jessop sourly.

"Indeed! When do you expect your brother back?"

"At any time now. To-morrow or next day, to meet the

directors at the board and report again upon his inspection."

"Again?"

"Yes; he has been down twice before."

"Who is down there?"

"Only the man in charge of the mine."

"Who is he?"

"Some fellow my father got hold of in connection with other mine speculations."

"Well, wouldn't he do?"

"Pooh! He is, I should say, out of the question."

"At a price?"

"At a price!" Jessop started and looked keenly at the solicitor.

"Every man they say has his price, my dear Jessop. We want the kind of man I describe. You say there is no such man. I say there are in the market, and I should say this is the very chap."

"But surely you would not bribe him to – "

"Don't use ugly terms. If I saw my way to make a hundred thousand pounds I should not shrink from giving a man five hundred to help me make it."

"No, nor a thousand," said Jessop.

"My dear boy, I would get him for five hundred if I could, but if I could not, I would go higher than you say; in fact, I would go up to ninety-five thousand sooner than lose five. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Anything to turn an honest penny."

"Exactly! So now then, as soon as possible, we must begin to

feel our way, so as to secure our man."

"But if there is not such a man to be had?"

"Then we must make one."

"Wrigley, I thought I was sharp," said Jessop, with a peculiar smile.

"But you find there is always a sharper."

"Was that a *lapsus linguae*, Wrigley?"

"If you like to call it so," said the lawyer coldly. "But to business. Let me know the moment your brother gets back."

"Yes, but why?"

"I am going down to see what I think of the mine."

Chapter Ten.
The Grim Visitor

"The game's up, then, Doctor, eh? There, man, don't shuffle. This isn't whist, but the game of life, and nature wins."

The Doctor stood holding his old friend's hand, and gazing sadly down in the fine manly face, which looked wonderfully calm and peaceful as he lay back on the white pillow.

"That's right; don't say medical things to me – clap-trap: you never did. We always understand each other, and I shouldn't like it now I'm dying. For that's it, Praed; the game's up. I haven't read so plainly how many trumps you held in your hand for all these years, old man, without being able to judge your face now."

"Reed, old fellow," said the Doctor, in a voice full of emotion, "God knows I have done my best. Let me send for – "

"Tchah! What for?" said the old man. "You know more than he does. It's of no use fighting against it. Nature says the works must stop soon. Very well; I shall meet it as I have met other losses in my time. Do you hear, Clive – Jessop?"

A murmur came from the other side of the bed, where the two young men were standing, and then all was still again, save the rumble of a vehicle in the street.

"It's disappointing just now, when I had made the *coup* of my life, and meant to settle down in peace; but it wasn't to be, and

I'm going to meet it like a man. Clive, boy, come here."

The young man came to the bedside and knelt down.

"Ah! I like that," said the old father. "Good lad!" and he laid his hand gently upon his son's head. "I'm not a grand old patriarch," he sighed. "What, Doctor? – not talk? Yes, I must have my say now, while there's time. Not a good old patriarch, Clive – not a religious man; made too much of a god of money; but I said my wife and sons should never know the poverty from which I had suffered, and I think it was right; but I overdid it, boy. Don't follow my example; there's no need. There – my blessing for what it's worth, boy. Now go: I want Jessop."

Clive rose, and his brother came and stood where he had knelt.

"Well," said the dying man, in a firm voice, "I have little to say to you, Jessop. Shake hands, my boy, and God forgive you, as I do – everything." Jessop was silent, and after a few moments the old man went on —

"I have settled everything, my lad. The Doctor here is one of my executors, and he will see that Clive does his duty by you; though he would without."

Jessop winced, for these words were very pregnant of meaning, and showed only too well the place he would take after his father's death.

"There," said his father, pressing his hand, "that is all. I know your nature, boy, so I will not ask you to promise things which you cannot perform. Go now."

"Not stay with you, father?" said the young man, speaking for

the first time.

"No; go now. I've done my duty by you, boy; now go and do yours by your brother. Good-bye, Jessop." There was dead silence, and the old man spoke again as he grasped his son's hand, "Good-bye, Jessop, for the last time."

"Good-bye, father," was the reply; and then, with head bent, the young man walked slowly out.

"Hah! that's over!" sighed the dying man. "He will not break his heart, Doctor; and if I had left him double, it would do him no good. Now then, Praed, I want to see little Janet. Where is she?"

"Downstairs in the drawing-room."

"That's right. Go and fetch her. Tell her not to be frightened. She shan't see me die, for it won't be yet."

The Doctor left the bedroom, and the old man was alone with his younger son.

"Take hold of my hand, Clive. Sit down, my lad. That's right. There, don't look so cut up, my boy. I'm only going to sleep like a man should. It's simply nature; not the horror fanatics teach us. Now I want to talk business to you for a few minutes, and then business and money will be dead to me for ever."

"You wish me to do something, father?"

"Yes, boy. You will find everything in my will – you and the Doctor. He's a good old friend, and his counsel is worth taking. Marry Janet, and make her a happy wife. She has some weaknesses, but you can mould her, my lad; and it will make her happy, and the Doctor too, for he loves you like a son."

"Yes, father."

"That's good. You're a fine, strong, clever man, Clive, but that was the dear, good, affectionate boy of twenty years ago speaking. Now then, about money matters. You'll be enormously rich over that mine, so for heaven's sake be a true, just man with it, and do your duty by all the shareholders. Stick to it through thick and thin. I remember all you told me when I recovered from my fit. I could repeat your report. But I was convinced before, when all the London world thought I was getting up a swindle. There! that's enough about the mine – save this. You'll be thinking of sharing with your brother. I forbid it. Keep to your portion as I have left it to you, and do good with it. To give to Jessop is to do evil. I am sorry, but it is the truth. He cannot help it perhaps, but he is not to be trusted, and you are not to league yourself with him in any way. You understand?"

"Yes, father!"

"I have made him a sufficiently rich man. Let him be content. You are not to trust him. I know Jessop by heart, and I can go from here feeling that I have done my duty by him."

At that moment the Doctor returned with his daughter, and the old speculator's face lit up with pleasure.

"Come here, Pussy," he said. "I'm not very dreadful yet, my dear."

"Dear Mr Reed – dear Mr Reed!" cried Janet, running sobbing to his side; "don't, pray, talk like that."

The old man smiled with content as the girl fell upon her knees

by the bed, and embraced him tenderly, "Ah! that's right. That's like my little darling," he said, and he stroked her cheek. "Don't cry any more, my dear. There! you two go farther away; Janet and I have a few words to say together."

Clive and the Doctor moved to the window and stood with their backs to the bed, the old man watching them intently for a few moments, and then smiling at Janet as he held and fondled her hand.

"There!" he said, "you are not to fret and be miserable about it, and when I'm gone it is not to interfere with your marriage."

"Oh, Mr Reed!" she cried passionately.

"No, no, no," he continued quietly; "not a bit. Life is short, my dear; enjoy it, and do your work in it while you can. And mind, there is to be no silly parade of mourning for me. I'm not going to have your pretty face spoiled with black crape, and all that nonsense. Mourn for me in your dear little heart, Janet: not sadly, but with pleasant, happy memories of one who held you when you were a baby, and who has always looked upon you as his little daughter." Janet's face went down on the old man's hands with the tears flowing silently.

"Now, just a few more words, my dear," he almost whispered. "Your father and I have rather spoiled you by indulgence."

"Yes, yes," she whispered quickly. "I have not deserved so much."

"Never mind; you are going to be a dear good girl now, and make Clive a true, loving wife."

"Yes, I'll try so hard."

"It will not take much trying, Janet, for he loves you very dearly."

She raised her head sharply, and there was an angry look in her eyes.

"No, no, you are wrong," said the old man. "Always the same, my pet. I can read you with these little jealous fits and fancies. I tell you, he loves you very dearly, and I'm going to say something else, my pet, my last little bit of scolding, for I've always watched you very keenly for my boy's sake."

"Mr Reed!" she whispered, shrinking from him and glancing towards the window; but he held her hands tightly.

"They cannot hear us, little one," he said, "and I want you to listen. For your own happiness, Janet, my child. It is poor Clive who ought to have been jealous and complained."

Janet hid her burning face.

"It was not all your fault, little one, but I saw a great deal. Innocent enough with you; but Jacob has always been trying to win Esau's heritage, and even his promised wife."

The girl sobbed bitterly now, and laid her burning face close to the old man's, hiding it in the pillow.

"Oh, don't, don't," she whispered. "I never liked him, but he was always flattering me and saying nice things."

"Poison with sugar round them, my dear. But that's all past. You are to be Clive's dear honoured wife. No more silly, girlish little bits of flirtation. You are not spoiled, my dear, only petted

a little too much. That's all to be put behind us now, is it not?"

"Yes, dear – yes, dear Mr Reed," she whispered, with her arms about his neck; and it was as if years had dropped away, and it was the little child the old man had petted and scolded a hundred times, asking forgiveness, as she whispered, "I will be good now, and love him very dearly."

"That's like my own child," said the old man. "Now let's hear the true woman speak."

"And do always what you wish," she said, looking him full in the eyes.

"That's right – try," he said, drawing her down to kiss her, and then signing to her to go.

"I'm tired," he said wearily. "Clive, take your little wife downstairs for a bit. Your hand, my boy. God bless you! Now, Doctor, I'll have an hour's sleep."

The Doctor signed for the young people to go down; and as he took a chair by the bed's head, Grantham Reed turned his head away from the light, and went off into the great sleep as calmly as a tired child.

Chapter Eleven.
Jessop Plays Trumps

Jessop Reed, when he left his father's bedroom, had gone straight down to the study, with his brow contracted and his heart full of bitterness, without seeing that he was closely watched, and that a pale, troubled face was raised over the top balustrade, which looked very dull and gloomy in the yellow light which streamed through the soot-darkened skylight panes.

"So that's it," he said to himself, as he closed the door and threw himself into his father's great morocco-covered chair. "I'm nobody at all. The new king is to reign, and his name is Clive. I'm not even executor. No voice in anything; only the naughty boy to be punished. If I could only see that will!"

His eyes wandered about the dark room with its conventional cases of books that were never read, and he looked at the cabinets and writing-table as if he expected to see some drawer open with the key already in it, so that he could take out the will and read it at his ease.

But he shook his head, for he knew that his father was too business-like a man to be careless over so important a document.

"At the lawyer's," he said to himself; "and there is no need. I know the old man too well; but I wonder what he has said. A few hundred a year for his naughty boy, and the dear, good,

industrious youth, who always did as father wished, nearly everything."

"I know," he said, half aloud, as he sat back in the chair and took out his cigar-case to open it and select a strong, black roll of the weed, bit off the end savagely, and spat it upon the carpet.

"I suppose I may smoke here now without getting into grief. Poor old boy! his game's over; but, curse him, he might have played fair."

He lit the cigar, and began to smoke and muse with his eyes half closed.

"I know," he thought, and he laughed bitterly. "To my dear old friend, Peter Praed, M.D., my cellar of wine, the Turner picture, and one hundred pounds to buy a mourning ring and as recompense for acting as my executor. To my servants fifty pounds each and six months' wages. To my son Jessop the interest on bank-stock to produce five hundred pounds per annum, paid in quarterly dividends. To my beloved son, Clive Reed, the whole of my remaining property in bank-stock, shares, and my interest in the 'White Virgin' mine in the county of Derby. Hah! yes," he said aloud, "and it is good, or the old man would not have taken it up as he has. Yes, it is no balloon business puffed into a state of inflation, but a genuine, solid affair. All to him, and he is co-executor with the Doctor. He said he had made him so months ago; I am nowhere. And that's my father!"

He bit off a piece of the end of his cigar and spat it out angrily, but started up as a thought struck him.

"No, that's not all," he muttered, as his eyes flashed, – "Janet!"

"Of course," he said, with a long-drawn breath, full of satisfaction, "he would not forget her. He worshipped the girl, and he would leave her quite independent of Clive. A hundred thousand, if he has left her a penny. The artful little jade: she played her cards right with the old man."

He started from the chair, threw the cigar-end into the fireplace, and hurried up to the drawing-room, to find it empty, and rang the bell.

"Where is Miss Praed?" he asked, as the servant appeared.

"She was fetched up into poor master's room, sir."

Jessop Reed went back to the study, and shut himself in, his brow contracted more and more, and lighting another cigar, he lay back smoking and thinking intently, but with his face less clouded by anger, as he felt more and more satisfied that he was right about his father's disposition of his property, and over his own plans and those of his friend Wrigley.

"There is such a thing as salvage when there is a fire," he said, with a laugh which disfigured his handsome features; "and it comes in too after a wreck. Well, we shall see, my dear brother; matters may balance themselves fairly after all."

He started almost out of his chair just then, for a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and there stood pretty, fair-haired Lyddy, with her eyes red and swollen with weeping.

"How did you get here?" cried Jessop angrily.

"I opened the door, dear, and came in softly; didn't you hear

me?"

"Hear you? No; and how many more times am I to tell you not to call me dear?"

"Oh, Jessop, don't, don't!" cried the poor girl, bursting into tears. "Poor master! he's dying fast, they say, and there'll be no need to hide anything from him now."

"But – but – "

"I was on the staircase watching for you, dear, and you were shut up here so long, instead of being with master, that I was afraid you were ill."

"Well, I'm not; so now go, there's a good girl; and wait a bit till I've settled something about you."

"Settled something about me, dear! Why, as soon as poor dear master's dead you'll be master then, and can do as you like. You won't be the first gentleman who has married a servant."

"Oh no, of course not," he replied, with a bitter sarcasm in his tone.

"And you will make me happy then, won't you, dear? For I am so miserable when I see you courting Miss Janet, I could find it in my heart to go some night to the Serpentine and end it all."

"Will you hold your tongue?" he cried, with a shiver. "Do you think I haven't enough to worry me as it is? Now, my good girl, is this a time for you to come bothering me?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.