

CHAPTER XI—MESMER'S CHEST

After a couple of weeks had passed, the kite seemed to give Edgar Caswall a new zest for life. He was never tired of looking at its movements. He had a comfortable armchair put out on the tower, wherein he sat sometimes all day long, watching as though the kite was a new toy and he a child lately come into possession of it. He did not seem to have lost interest in Lilla, for he still paid an occasional visit at Mercy Farm.

Indeed, his feeling towards her, whatever it had been at first, had now so far changed that it had become a distinct affection of a purely animal kind. Indeed, it seemed as though the man's nature had become corrupted, and that all the baser and more selfish and more reckless qualities had become more conspicuous. There was not so much sternness apparent in his nature, because there was less self-restraint. Determination had become indifference.

The visible change in Edgar was that he grew morbid, sad, silent; the neighbours thought he was going mad. He became absorbed in the kite, and watched it not only by day, but often all night long. It became an obsession to him.

Caswall took a personal interest in the keeping of the great kite flying. He had a vast coil of cord efficient for the purpose, which worked on a roller fixed on the parapet of the tower. There was a winch for the pulling in of the slack; the outgoing line being controlled by a ratchet. There was invariably one man at least, day and night, on the tower to attend to it. At such an elevation there was always a strong wind, and at times the kite rose to an enormous height, as well as travelling for great distances laterally. In fact, the kite became, in a short time, one of the curiosities of *Castra Regis* and all around it. Edgar began to attribute to it, in his own mind, almost human qualities. It became to him a separate entity, with a mind and a soul of its own. Being idle-handed all day, he began to apply to what he considered the service of the kite some of his spare time, and found a new pleasure—a new object in life—in the old schoolboy game of sending up “runners” to the kite. The way this is done is to get round pieces of paper so cut that there is a hole in the centre, through which the string of the kite passes. The natural action of the wind-pressure takes the paper along the string, and so up to the kite itself, no matter how high or how far it may have gone.

In the early days of this amusement Edgar Caswall spent hours. Hundreds of such messengers flew along the string, until soon he bethought him of writing messages on these papers so that he could make known his ideas to the kite. It may be that his brain gave way under the opportunities given by his illusion of the entity of the toy and its power of separate thought. From sending messages he came to making direct speech to the kite—without, however, ceasing to send the runners. Doubtless, the height of the tower, seated as it was on the hill-top, the rushing of the ceaseless wind, the hypnotic effect of the lofty altitude of the speck in the sky at which he gazed, and the rushing of the paper messengers up the string till sight of them was lost in distance, all helped to further affect his brain, undoubtedly giving way under the strain of beliefs and circumstances which were at once stimulating to the imagination, occupative of his mind, and absorbing.

The next step of intellectual decline was to bring to bear on the main idea of the conscious identity of the kite all sorts of subjects which had imaginative force or tendency of their own. He had, in *Castra Regis*, a large collection of curious and interesting things formed in the past by his forebears, of similar tastes to his own. There were all sorts of strange anthropological specimens, both old and new, which had been collected through various travels in strange places: ancient Egyptian relics from tombs and mummies; curios from Australia, New Zealand, and the South

Seas; idols and images—from Tartar ikons to ancient Egyptian, Persian, and Indian objects of worship; objects of death and torture of American Indians; and, above all, a vast collection of lethal weapons of every kind and from every place—Chinese “high pinders,” double knives, Afghan double-edged scimitars made to cut a body in two, heavy knives from all the Eastern countries, ghost daggers from Thibet, the terrible kukri of the Ghourka and other hill tribes of India, assassins’ weapons from Italy and Spain, even the knife which was formerly carried by the slave-drivers of the Mississippi region. Death and pain of every kind were fully represented in that gruesome collection.

That it had a fascination for Oolanga goes without saying. He was never tired of visiting the museum in the tower, and spent endless hours in inspecting the exhibits, till he was thoroughly familiar with every detail of all of them. He asked permission to clean and polish and sharpen them—a favour which was readily granted. In addition to the above objects, there were many things of a kind to awaken human fear. Stuffed serpents of the most objectionable and horrid kind; giant insects from the tropics, fearsome in every detail; fishes and crustaceans covered with weird spikes; dried octopuses of great size. Other things, too, there were, not less deadly though seemingly innocuous—dried fungi, traps intended for birds, beasts, fishes, reptiles, and insects; machines which could produce pain of any kind and degree, and the only mercy of which was the power of producing speedy death.

Caswall, who had never before seen any of these things, except those which he had collected himself, found a constant amusement and interest in them. He studied them, their uses, their mechanism—where there was such—and their places of origin, until he had an ample and real knowledge of all concerning them. Many were secret and intricate, but he never rested till he found out all the secrets. When once he had become interested in strange objects, and the way to use them, he began to explore various likely places for similar finds. He began to inquire of his household where strange lumber was kept. Several of the men spoke of old Simon Chester as one who knew everything in and about the house. Accordingly, he sent for the old man, who came at once. He was very old, nearly ninety years of age, and very infirm. He had been born in the Castle, and had served its succession of masters—present or absent—ever since. When Edgar began to question him on the subject regarding which he had sent for him, old Simon exhibited much perturbation. In fact, he became so frightened that his master, fully believing that he was concealing something, ordered him to tell at once what remained unseen, and where it was hidden away. Face to face with discovery of his secret, the old man, in a pitiable state of concern, spoke out even more fully than Mr. Caswall had expected.

“Indeed, indeed, sir, everything is here in the tower that has ever been put away in my time except—except—” here he began to shake and tremble it—“except the chest which Mr. Edgar—he who was Mr. Edgar when I first took service—brought back from France, after he had been with Dr. Mesmer. The trunk has been kept in my room for safety; but I shall send it down here now.”

“What is in it?” asked Edgar sharply.

“That I do not know. Moreover, it is a peculiar trunk, without any visible means of opening.”

“Is there no lock?”

“I suppose so, sir; but I do not know. There is no keyhole.”

“Send it here; and then come to me yourself.”

The trunk, a heavy one with steel bands round it, but no lock or keyhole, was carried in by two men. Shortly afterwards old Simon attended his master. When he came into the room, Mr. Caswall himself went and closed the door; then he asked:

“How do you open it?”

“I do not know, sir.”

“Do you mean to say that you never opened it?”

“Most certainly I say so, your honour. How could I? It was entrusted to me with the other things by my master. To open it would have been a breach of trust.”

Caswall sneered.

“Quite remarkable! Leave it with me. Close the door behind you. Stay—did no one ever tell you about it—say anything regarding it—make any remark?”

Old Simon turned pale, and put his trembling hands together.

“Oh, sir, I entreat you not to touch it. That trunk probably contains secrets which Dr. Mesmer told my master. Told them to his ruin!”

“How do you mean? What ruin?”

“Sir, he it was who, men said, sold his soul to the Evil One; I had thought that that time and the evil of it had all passed away.”

“That will do. Go away; but remain in your own room, or within call. I may want you.”

The old man bowed deeply and went out trembling, but without speaking a word.

CHAPTER XII—THE CHEST OPENED

Left alone in the turret-room, Edgar Caswall carefully locked the door and hung a handkerchief over the keyhole. Next, he inspected the windows, and saw that they were not overlooked from any angle of the main building. Then he carefully examined the trunk, going over it with a magnifying glass. He found it intact: the steel bands were flawless; the whole trunk was compact. After sitting opposite to it for some time, and the shades of evening beginning to melt into darkness, he gave up the task and went to his bedroom, after locking the door of the turret-room behind him and taking away the key.

He woke in the morning at daylight, and resumed his patient but unavailing study of the metal trunk. This he continued during the whole day with the same result—humiliating disappointment, which overwrought his nerves and made his head ache. The result of the long strain was seen later in the afternoon, when he sat locked within the turret-room before the still baffling trunk, distraught, listless and yet agitated, sunk in a settled gloom. As the dusk was falling he told the steward to send him two men, strong ones. These he ordered to take the trunk to his bedroom. In that room he then sat on into the night, without pausing even to take any food. His mind was in a whirl, a fever of excitement. The result was that when, late in the night, he locked himself in his room his brain was full of odd fancies; he was on the high road to mental disturbance. He lay down on his bed in the dark, still brooding over the mystery of the closed trunk.

Gradually he yielded to the influences of silence and darkness. After lying there quietly for some time, his mind became active again. But this time there were round him no disturbing influences; his brain was active and able to work freely and to deal with memory. A thousand forgotten—or only half-known—incidents, fragments of conversations or theories long ago guessed at and long forgotten, crowded on his mind. He seemed to hear again around him the legions of whirring wings to which he had been so lately accustomed. Even to himself he knew that that was an effort of imagination founded on imperfect memory. But he was content that

imagination should work, for out of it might come some solution of the mystery which surrounded him. And in this frame of mind, sleep made another and more successful essay. This time he enjoyed peaceful slumber, restful alike to his wearied body and his overwrought brain.

In his sleep he arose, and, as if in obedience to some influence beyond and greater than himself, lifted the great trunk and set it on a strong table at one side of the room, from which he had previously removed a quantity of books. To do this, he had to use an amount of strength which was, he knew, far beyond him in his normal state. As it was, it seemed easy enough; everything yielded before his touch. Then he became conscious that somehow—how, he never could remember—the chest was open. He unlocked his door, and, taking the chest on his shoulder, carried it up to the turret-room, the door of which also he unlocked. Even at the time he was amazed at his own strength, and wondered whence it had come. His mind, lost in conjecture, was too far off to realise more immediate things. He knew that the chest was enormously heavy. He seemed, in a sort of vision which lit up the absolute blackness around, to see the two sturdy servant men staggering under its great weight. He locked himself again in the turret-room, and laid the opened chest on a table, and in the darkness began to unpack it, laying out the contents, which were mainly of metal and glass—great pieces in strange forms—on another table. He was conscious of being still asleep, and of acting rather in obedience to some unseen and unknown command than in accordance with any reasonable plan, to be followed by results which he understood. This phase completed, he proceeded to arrange in order the component parts of some large instruments, formed mostly of glass. His fingers seemed to have acquired a new and exquisite subtlety and even a volition of their own. Then weariness of brain came upon him; his head sank down on his breast, and little by little everything became wrapped in gloom.

He awoke in the early morning in his bedroom, and looked around him, now clear-headed, in amazement. In its usual place on the strong table stood the great steel-hooped chest without lock or key. But it was now locked. He arose quietly and stole to the turret-room. There everything was as it had been on the previous evening. He looked out of the window where high in air flew, as usual, the giant kite. He unlocked the wicket gate of the turret stair and went out on the roof. Close to him was the great coil of cord on its reel. It was humming in the morning breeze, and when he touched the string it sent a quick thrill through hand and arm. There was no sign anywhere that there had been any disturbance or displacement of anything during the night.

Utterly bewildered, he sat down in his room to think. Now for the first time he FELT that he was asleep and dreaming. Presently he fell asleep again, and slept for a long time. He awoke hungry and made a hearty meal. Then towards evening, having locked himself in, he fell asleep again. When he woke he was in darkness, and was quite at sea as to his whereabouts. He began feeling about the dark room, and was recalled to the consequences of his position by the breaking of a large piece of glass. Having obtained a light, he discovered this to be a glass wheel, part of an elaborate piece of mechanism which he must in his sleep have taken from the chest, which was now opened. He had once again opened it whilst asleep, but he had no recollection of the circumstances.

Caswall came to the conclusion that there had been some sort of dual action of his mind, which might lead to some catastrophe or some discovery of his secret plans; so he resolved to forgo for a while the pleasure of making discoveries regarding the chest. To this end, he applied himself to quite another matter—an investigation of the other treasures and rare objects in his collections. He went amongst them in simple, idle curiosity, his main object being to discover some strange item which he might use for experiment with the kite. He had already resolved to try some runners other than those made of paper. He had a vague idea that with such a force as the great

kite straining at its leash, this might be used to lift to the altitude of the kite itself heavier articles. His first experiment with articles of little but increasing weight was eminently successful. So he added by degrees more and more weight, until he found out that the lifting power of the kite was considerable. He then determined to take a step further, and send to the kite some of the articles which lay in the steel-hooped chest. The last time he had opened it in sleep, it had not been shut again, and he had inserted a wedge so that he could open it at will. He made examination of the contents, but came to the conclusion that the glass objects were unsuitable. They were too light for testing weight, and they were so frail as to be dangerous to send to such a height.

So he looked around for something more solid with which to experiment. His eye caught sight of an object which at once attracted him. This was a small copy of one of the ancient Egyptian gods—that of Bes, who represented the destructive power of nature. It was so bizarre and mysterious as to commend itself to his mad humour. In lifting it from the cabinet, he was struck by its great weight in proportion to its size. He made accurate examination of it by the aid of some instruments, and came to the conclusion that it was carved from a lump of lodestone. He remembered that he had read somewhere of an ancient Egyptian god cut from a similar substance, and, thinking it over, he came to the conclusion that he must have read it in Sir Thomas Brown's *POPULAR ERRORS*, a book of the seventeenth century. He got the book from the library, and looked out the passage:

“A great example we have from the observation of our learned friend Mr. Graves, in an Aegyptian idol cut out of Loadstone and found among the Mummies; which still retains its attraction, though probably taken out of the mine about two thousand years ago.”

The strangeness of the figure, and its being so close akin to his own nature, attracted him. He made from thin wood a large circular runner, and in front of it placed the weighty god, sending it up to the flying kite along the throbbing cord.

CHAPTER XIII—OOLANGA'S HALLUCINATIONS

During the last few days Lady Arabella had been getting exceedingly impatient. Her debts, always pressing, were growing to an embarrassing amount. The only hope she had of comfort in life was a good marriage; but the good marriage on which she had fixed her eye did not seem to move quickly enough—indeed, it did not seem to move at all—in the right direction. Edgar Caswall was not an ardent wooer. From the very first he seemed *DIFFICILE*, but he had been keeping to his own room ever since his struggle with Mimi Watford. On that occasion Lady Arabella had shown him in an unmistakable way what her feelings were; indeed, she had made it known to him, in a more overt way than pride should allow, that she wished to help and support him. The moment when she had gone across the room to stand beside him in his mesmeric struggle, had been the very limit of her voluntary action. It was quite bitter enough, she felt, that he did not come to her, but now that she had made that advance, she felt that any withdrawal on his part would, to a woman of her class, be nothing less than a flaming insult. Had she not classed herself with his nigger servant, an unreformed savage? Had she not shown her preference for him at the festival of his home-coming? Had she not. . . Lady Arabella was cold-blooded, and she was prepared to go through all that might be necessary of indifference, and even insult, to become chatelaine of *Castra Regis*. In the meantime, she would show no hurry—she must wait. She might, in an unostentatious way, come to him again. She knew him now, and could make a

keen guess at his desires with regard to Lilla Watford. With that secret in her possession, she could bring pressure to bear on Caswall which would make it no easy matter for him to evade her. The great difficulty was how to get near him. He was shut up within his Castle, and guarded by a defence of convention which she could not pass without danger of ill repute to herself. Over this question she thought and thought for days and nights. At last she decided that the only way would be to go to him openly at Castra Regis. Her rank and position would make such a thing possible, if carefully done. She could explain matters afterwards if necessary. Then when they were alone, she would use her arts and her experience to make him commit himself. After all, he was only a man, with a man's dislike of difficult or awkward situations. She felt quite sufficient confidence in her own womanhood to carry her through any difficulty which might arise.

From Diana's Grove she heard each day the luncheon-gong from Castra Regis sound, and knew the hour when the servants would be in the back of the house. She would enter the house at that hour, and, pretending that she could not make anyone hear her, would seek him in his own rooms. The tower was, she knew, away from all the usual sounds of the house, and moreover she knew that the servants had strict orders not to interrupt him when he was in the turret chamber. She had found out, partly by the aid of an opera-glass and partly by judicious questioning, that several times lately a heavy chest had been carried to and from his room, and that it rested in the room each night. She was, therefore, confident that he had some important work on hand which would keep him busy for long spells.

Meanwhile, another member of the household at Castra Regis had schemes which he thought were working to fruition. A man in the position of a servant has plenty of opportunity of watching his betters and forming opinions regarding them. Oolanga was in his way a clever, unscrupulous rogue, and he felt that with things moving round him in this great household there should be opportunities of self-advancement. Being unscrupulous and stealthy—and a savage—he looked to dishonest means. He saw plainly enough that Lady Arabella was making a dead set at his master, and he was watchful of the slightest sign of anything which might enhance this knowledge. Like the other men in the house, he knew of the carrying to and fro of the great chest, and had got it into his head that the care exercised in its portage indicated that it was full of treasure. He was for ever lurking around the turret-rooms on the chance of making some useful discovery. But he was as cautious as he was stealthy, and took care that no one else watched him.

It was thus that the negro became aware of Lady Arabella's venture into the house, as she thought, unseen. He took more care than ever, since he was watching another, that the positions were not reversed. More than ever he kept his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut. Seeing Lady Arabella gliding up the stairs towards his master's room, he took it for granted that she was there for no good, and doubled his watching intentness and caution.

Oolanga was disappointed, but he dared not exhibit any feeling lest it should betray that he was hiding. Therefore he slunk downstairs again noiselessly, and waited for a more favourable opportunity of furthering his plans. It must be borne in mind that he thought that the heavy trunk was full of valuables, and that he believed that Lady Arabella had come to try to steal it. His purpose of using for his own advantage the combination of these two ideas was seen later in the day. Oolanga secretly followed her home. He was an expert at this game, and succeeded admirably on this occasion. He watched her enter the private gate of Diana's Grove, and then, taking a roundabout course and keeping out of her sight, he at last overtook her in a thick part of the Grove where no one could see the meeting.

Lady Arabella was much surprised. She had not seen the negro for several days, and had almost forgotten his existence. Oolanga would have been startled had he known and been capable of understanding the real value placed on him, his beauty, his worthiness, by other persons, and compared it with the value in these matters in which he held himself. Doubtless Oolanga had his dreams like other men. In such cases he saw himself as a young sun-god, as beautiful as the eye of dusky or even white womanhood had ever dwelt upon. He would have been filled with all noble and captivating qualities—or those regarded as such in West Africa. Women would have loved him, and would have told him so in the overt and fervid manner usual in affairs of the heart in the shadowy depths of the forest of the Gold Coast.

Oolanga came close behind Lady Arabella, and in a hushed voice, suitable to the importance of his task, and in deference to the respect he had for her and the place, began to unfold the story of his love. Lady Arabella was not usually a humorous person, but no man or woman of the white race could have checked the laughter which rose spontaneously to her lips. The circumstances were too grotesque, the contrast too violent, for subdued mirth. The man a debased specimen of one of the most primitive races of the earth, and of an ugliness which was simply devilish; the woman of high degree, beautiful, accomplished. She thought that her first moment's consideration of the outrage—it was nothing less in her eyes—had given her the full material for thought. But every instant after threw new and varied lights on the affront. Her indignation was too great for passion; only irony or satire would meet the situation. Her cold, cruel nature helped, and she did not shrink to subject this ignorant savage to the merciless fire-lash of her scorn.

Oolanga was dimly conscious that he was being flouted; but his anger was no less keen because of the measure of his ignorance. So he gave way to it, as does a tortured beast. He ground his great teeth together, raved, stamped, and swore in barbarous tongues and with barbarous imagery. Even Lady Arabella felt that it was well she was within reach of help, or he might have offered her brutal violence—even have killed her.

“Am I to understand,” she said with cold disdain, so much more effective to wound than hot passion, “that you are offering me your love? Your—love?”

For reply he nodded his head. The scorn of her voice, in a sort of baleful hiss, sounded—and felt—like the lash of a whip.

“And you dared! you—a savage—a slave—the basest thing in the world of vermin! Take care! I don't value your worthless life more than I do that of a rat or a spider. Don't let me ever see your hideous face here again, or I shall rid the earth of you.”

As she was speaking, she had taken out her revolver and was pointing it at him. In the immediate presence of death his impudence forsook him, and he made a weak effort to justify himself. His speech was short, consisting of single words. To Lady Arabella it sounded mere gibberish, but it was in his own dialect, and meant love, marriage, wife. From the intonation of the words, she guessed, with her woman's quick intuition, at their meaning; but she quite failed to follow, when, becoming more pressing, he continued to urge his suit in a mixture of the grossest animal passion and ridiculous threats. He warned her that he knew she had tried to steal his master's treasure, and that he had caught her in the act. But if she would be his, he would share the treasure with her, and they could live in luxury in the African forests. But if she refused, he would tell his master, who would flog and torture her and then give her to the police, who would kill her.

CHAPTER XIV—BATTLE RENEWED

The consequences of that meeting in the dusk of Diana's Grove were acute and far-reaching, and not only to the two engaged in it. From Oolanga, this might have been expected by anyone who knew the character of the tropical African savage. To such, there are two passions that are inexhaustible and insatiable—vanity and that which they are pleased to call love. Oolanga left the Grove with an absorbing hatred in his heart. His lust and greed were afire, while his vanity had been wounded to the core. Lady Arabella's icy nature was not so deeply stirred, though she was in a seething passion. More than ever she was set upon bringing Edgar Caswall to her feet. The obstacles she had encountered, the insults she had endured, were only as fuel to the purpose of revenge which consumed her.

As she sought her own rooms in Diana's Grove, she went over the whole subject again and again, always finding in the face of Lilla Watford a key to a problem which puzzled her—the problem of a way to turn Caswall's powers—his very existence—to aid her purpose.

When in her boudoir, she wrote a note, taking so much trouble over it that she destroyed, and rewrote, till her dainty waste-basket was half-full of torn sheets of notepaper. When quite satisfied, she copied out the last sheet afresh, and then carefully burned all the spoiled fragments. She put the copied note in an emblazoned envelope, and directed it to Edgar Caswall at *Castra Regis*. This she sent off by one of her grooms. The letter ran:

“DEAR MR. CASWALL,

“I want to have a chat with you on a subject in which I believe you are interested. Will you kindly call for me one day after lunch—say at three or four o'clock, and we can walk a little way together. Only as far as Mercy Farm, where I want to see Lilla and Mimi Watford. We can take a cup of tea at the Farm. Do not bring your African servant with you, as I am afraid his face frightens the girls. After all, he is not pretty, is he? I have an idea you will be pleased with your visit this time.

“Yours sincerely, “ARABELLA MARCH.”

At half-past three next day, Edgar Caswall called at Diana's Grove. Lady Arabella met him on the roadway outside the gate. She wished to take the servants into her confidence as little as possible. She turned when she saw him coming, and walked beside him towards Mercy Farm, keeping step with him as they walked. When they got near Mercy, she turned and looked around her, expecting to see Oolanga or some sign of him. He was, however, not visible. He had received from his master peremptory orders to keep out of sight—an order for which the African scored a new offence up against her. They found Lilla and Mimi at home and seemingly glad to see them, though both the girls were surprised at the visit coming so soon after the other.

The proceedings were a repetition of the battle of souls of the former visit. On this occasion, however, Edgar Caswall had only the presence of Lady Arabella to support him—Oolanga being absent; but Mimi lacked the support of Adam Salton, which had been of such effective service before. This time the struggle for supremacy of will was longer and more determined. Caswall felt that if he could not achieve supremacy he had better give up the idea, so all his pride was enlisted against Mimi. When they had been waiting for the door to be opened, Lady Arabella, believing in a sudden attack, had said to him in a low voice, which somehow carried conviction:

“This time you should win. Mimi is, after all, only a woman. Show her no mercy. That is weakness. Fight her, beat her, trample on her—kill her if need be. She stands in your way, and I

hate her. Never take your eyes off her. Never mind Lilla—she is afraid of you. You are already her master. Mimi will try to make you look at her cousin. There lies defeat. Let nothing take your attention from Mimi, and you will win. If she is overcoming you, take my hand and hold it hard whilst you are looking into her eyes. If she is too strong for you, I shall interfere. I'll make a diversion, and under cover of it you must retire unbeaten, even if not victorious. Hush! they are coming.”

The two girls came to the door together. Strange sounds were coming up over the Brow from the west. It was the rustling and crackling of the dry reeds and rushes from the low lands. The season had been an unusually dry one. Also the strong east wind was helping forward enormous flocks of birds, most of them pigeons with white cowls. Not only were their wings whirring, but their cooing was plainly audible. From such a multitude of birds the mass of sound, individually small, assumed the volume of a storm. Surprised at the influx of birds, to which they had been strangers so long, they all looked towards *Castra Regis*, from whose high tower the great kite had been flying as usual. But even as they looked, the cord broke, and the great kite fell headlong in a series of sweeping dives. Its own weight, and the aerial force opposed to it, which caused it to rise, combined with the strong easterly breeze, had been too much for the great length of cord holding it.

Somehow, the mishap to the kite gave new hope to Mimi. It was as though the side issues had been shorn away, so that the main struggle was thenceforth on simpler lines. She had a feeling in her heart, as though some religious chord had been newly touched. It may, of course, have been that with the renewal of the bird voices a fresh courage, a fresh belief in the good issue of the struggle came too. In the misery of silence, from which they had all suffered for so long, any new train of thought was almost bound to be a boon. As the inrush of birds continued, their wings beating against the crackling rushes, Lady Arabella grew pale, and almost fainted.

“What is that?” she asked suddenly.

To Mimi, born and bred in Siam, the sound was strangely like an exaggeration of the sound produced by a snake-charmer.

Edgar Caswall was the first to recover from the interruption of the falling kite. After a few minutes he seemed to have quite recovered his *SANG FROID*, and was able to use his brains to the end which he had in view. Mimi too quickly recovered herself, but from a different cause. With her it was a deep religious conviction that the struggle round her was of the powers of Good and Evil, and that Good was triumphing. The very appearance of the snowy birds, with the cowls of Saint Columba, heightened the impression. With this conviction strong upon her, she continued the strange battle with fresh vigour. She seemed to tower over Caswall, and he to give back before her oncoming. Once again her vigorous passes drove him to the door. He was just going out backward when Lady Arabella, who had been gazing at him with fixed eyes, caught his hand and tried to stop his movement. She was, however, unable to do any good, and so, holding hands, they passed out together. As they did so, the strange music which had so alarmed Lady Arabella suddenly stopped. Instinctively they all looked towards the tower of *Castra Regis*, and saw that the workmen had refixed the kite, which had risen again and was beginning to float out to its former station.

As they were looking, the door opened and Michael Watford came into the room. By that time all had recovered their self-possession, and there was nothing out of the common to attract his attention. As he came in, seeing inquiring looks all around him, he said:

“The new influx of birds is only the annual migration of pigeons from Africa. I am told that it will soon be over.”

The second victory of Mimi Watford made Edgar Caswall more moody than ever. He felt thrown back on himself, and this, added to his absorbing interest in the hope of a victory of his mesmeric powers, became a deep and settled purpose of revenge. The chief object of his animosity was, of course, Mimi, whose will had overcome his, but it was obscured in greater or lesser degree by all who had opposed him. Lilla was next to Mimi in his hate—Lilla, the harmless, tender-hearted, sweet-natured girl, whose heart was so full of love for all things that in it was no room for the passions of ordinary life—whose nature resembled those doves of St. Columba, whose colour she wore, whose appearance she reflected. Adam Salton came next—after a gap; for against him Caswall had no direct animosity. He regarded him as an interference, a difficulty to be got rid of or destroyed. The young Australian had been so discreet that the most he had against him was his knowledge of what had been. Caswall did not understand him, and to such a nature as his, ignorance was a cause of alarm, of dread.

Caswall resumed his habit of watching the great kite straining at its cord, varying his vigils in this way by a further examination of the mysterious treasures of his house, especially Mesmer's chest. He sat much on the roof of the tower, brooding over his thwarted passion. The vast extent of his possessions, visible to him at that altitude, might, one would have thought, have restored some of his complacency. But the very extent of his ownership, thus perpetually brought before him, created a fresh sense of grievance. How was it, he thought, that with so much at command that others wished for, he could not achieve the dearest wishes of his heart?

In this state of intellectual and moral depravity, he found a solace in the renewal of his experiments with the mechanical powers of the kite. For a couple of weeks he did not see Lady Arabella, who was always on the watch for a chance of meeting him; neither did he see the Watford girls, who studiously kept out of his way. Adam Salton simply marked time, keeping ready to deal with anything that might affect his friends. He called at the farm and heard from Mimi of the last battle of wills, but it had only one consequence. He got from Ross several more mongooses, including a second king-cobra-killer, which he generally carried with him in its box whenever he walked out.

Mr. Caswall's experiments with the kite went on successfully. Each day he tried the lifting of greater weight, and it seemed almost as if the machine had a sentience of its own, which was increasing with the obstacles placed before it. All this time the kite hung in the sky at an enormous height. The wind was steadily from the north, so the trend of the kite was to the south. All day long, runners of increasing magnitude were sent up. These were only of paper or thin cardboard, or leather, or other flexible materials. The great height at which the kite hung made a great concave curve in the string, so that as the runners went up they made a flapping sound. If one laid a finger on the string, the sound answered to the flapping of the runner in a sort of hollow intermittent murmur. Edgar Caswall, who was now wholly obsessed by the kite and all belonging to it, found a distinct resemblance between that intermittent rumble and the snake-charming music produced by the pigeons flying through the dry reeds.

One day he made a discovery in Mesmer's chest which he thought he would utilise with regard to the runners. This was a great length of wire, "fine as human hair," coiled round a finely made wheel, which ran to a wondrous distance freely, and as lightly. He tried this on runners, and found it work admirably. Whether the runner was alone, or carried something much more weighty than itself, it worked equally well. Also it was strong enough and light enough to draw back the runner without undue strain. He tried this a good many times successfully, but it was now growing dusk and he found some difficulty in keeping the runner in sight. So he looked for something heavy enough to keep it still. He placed the Egyptian image of Bes on the fine wire,

which crossed the wooden ledge which protected it. Then, the darkness growing, he went indoors and forgot all about it.

He had a strange feeling of uneasiness that night—not sleeplessness, for he seemed conscious of being asleep. At daylight he rose, and as usual looked out for the kite. He did not see it in its usual position in the sky, so looked round the points of the compass. He was more than astonished when presently he saw the missing kite struggling as usual against the controlling cord. But it had gone to the further side of the tower, and now hung and strained AGAINST THE WIND to the north. He thought it so strange that he determined to investigate the phenomenon, and to say nothing about it in the meantime.

In his many travels, Edgar Caswall had been accustomed to use the sextant, and was now an expert in the matter. By the aid of this and other instruments, he was able to fix the position of the kite and the point over which it hung. He was startled to find that exactly under it—so far as he could ascertain—was Diana's Grove. He had an inclination to take Lady Arabella into his confidence in the matter, but he thought better of it and wisely refrained. For some reason which he did not try to explain to himself, he was glad of his silence, when, on the following morning, he found, on looking out, that the point over which the kite then hovered was Mercy Farm. When he had verified this with his instruments, he sat before the window of the tower, looking out and thinking. The new locality was more to his liking than the other; but the why of it puzzled him, all the same. He spent the rest of the day in the turret-room, which he did not leave all day. It seemed to him that he was now drawn by forces which he could not control—of which, indeed, he had no knowledge—in directions which he did not understand, and which were without his own volition. In sheer helpless inability to think the problem out satisfactorily, he called up a servant and told him to tell Oolanga that he wanted to see him at once in the turret-room. The answer came back that the African had not been seen since the previous evening.

Caswall was now so irritable that even this small thing upset him. As he was distraught and wanted to talk to somebody, he sent for Simon Chester, who came at once, breathless with hurrying and upset by the unexpected summons. Caswall bade him sit down, and when the old man was in a less uneasy frame of mind, he again asked him if he had ever seen what was in Mesmer's chest or heard it spoken about.

Chester admitted that he had once, in the time of "the then Mr. Edgar," seen the chest open, which, knowing something of its history and guessing more, so upset him that he had fainted. When he recovered, the chest was closed. From that time the then Mr. Edgar had never spoken about it again.

When Caswall asked him to describe what he had seen when the chest was open, he got very agitated, and, despite all his efforts to remain calm, he suddenly went off into a faint. Caswall summoned servants, who applied the usual remedies. Still the old man did not recover. After the lapse of a considerable time, the doctor who had been summoned made his appearance. A glance was sufficient for him to make up his mind. Still, he knelt down by the old man, and made a careful examination. Then he rose to his feet, and in a hushed voice said:

"I grieve to say, sir, that he has passed away."

CHAPTER XV—ON THE TRACK

Those who had seen Edgar Caswall familiarly since his arrival, and had already estimated his cold-blooded nature at something of its true value, were surprised that he took so to heart the death of old Chester. The fact was that not one of them had guessed correctly at his character. They thought, naturally enough, that the concern which he felt was that of a master for a faithful old servant of his family. They little thought that it was merely the selfish expression of his disappointment, that he had thus lost the only remaining clue to an interesting piece of family history—one which was now and would be for ever wrapped in mystery. Caswall knew enough about the life of his ancestor in Paris to wish to know more fully and more thoroughly all that had been. The period covered by that ancestor's life in Paris was one inviting every form of curiosity.

Lady Arabella, who had her own game to play, saw in the METIER of sympathetic friend, a series of meetings with the man she wanted to secure. She made the first use of the opportunity the day after old Chester's death; indeed, as soon as the news had filtered in through the back door of Diana's Grove. At that meeting, she played her part so well that even Caswall's cold nature was impressed.

Oolanga was the only one who did not credit her with at least some sense of fine feeling in the matter. In emotional, as in other matters, Oolanga was distinctly a utilitarian, and as he could not understand anyone feeling grief except for his own suffering, pain, or for the loss of money, he could not understand anyone simulating such an emotion except for show intended to deceive. He thought that she had come to Castra Regis again for the opportunity of stealing something, and was determined that on this occasion the chance of pressing his advantage over her should not pass. He felt, therefore, that the occasion was one for extra carefulness in the watching of all that went on. Ever since he had come to the conclusion that Lady Arabella was trying to steal the treasure-chest, he suspected nearly everyone of the same design, and made it a point to watch all suspicious persons and places. As Adam was engaged on his own researches regarding Lady Arabella, it was only natural that there should be some crossing of each other's tracks. This is what did actually happen.

Adam had gone for an early morning survey of the place in which he was interested, taking with him the mongoose in its box. He arrived at the gate of Diana's Grove just as Lady Arabella was preparing to set out for Castra Regis on what she considered her mission of comfort. Seeing Adam from her window going through the shadows of the trees round the gate, she thought that he must be engaged on some purpose similar to her own. So, quickly making her toilet, she quietly left the house, and, taking advantage of every shadow and substance which could hide her, followed him on his walk.

Oolanga, the experienced tracker, followed her, but succeeded in hiding his movements better than she did. He saw that Adam had on his shoulder a mysterious box, which he took to contain something valuable. Seeing that Lady Arabella was secretly following Adam, he was confirmed in this idea. His mind—such as it was—was fixed on her trying to steal, and he credited her at once with making use of this new opportunity.

In his walk, Adam went into the grounds of Castra Regis, and Oolanga saw her follow him with great secrecy. He feared to go closer, as now on both sides of him were enemies who might make discovery. When he realised that Lady Arabella was bound for the Castle, he devoted himself to following her with singleness of purpose. He therefore missed seeing that Adam branched off the track and returned to the high road.

That night Edgar Caswall had slept badly. The tragic occurrence of the day was on his mind, and he kept waking and thinking of it. After an early breakfast, he sat at the open window watching the kite and thinking of many things. From his room he could see all round the neighbourhood, but the two places that interested him most were Mercy Farm and Diana's Grove. At first the movements about those spots were of a humble kind—those that belong to domestic service or agricultural needs—the opening of doors and windows, the sweeping and brushing, and generally the restoration of habitual order.

From his high window—whose height made it a screen from the observation of others—he saw the chain of watchers move into his own grounds, and then presently break up—Adam Salton going one way, and Lady Arabella, followed by the nigger, another. Then Oolanga disappeared amongst the trees; but Caswall could see that he was still watching. Lady Arabella, after looking around her, slipped in by the open door, and he could, of course, see her no longer.

Presently, however, he heard a light tap at his door, then the door opened slowly, and he could see the flash of Lady Arabella's white dress through the opening.

CHAPTER XVI—A VISIT OF SYMPATHY

Caswall was genuinely surprised when he saw Lady Arabella, though he need not have been, after what had already occurred in the same way. The look of surprise on his face was so much greater than Lady Arabella had expected—though she thought she was prepared to meet anything that might occur—that she stood still, in sheer amazement. Cold-blooded as she was and ready for all social emergencies, she was nonplussed how to go on. She was plucky, however, and began to speak at once, although she had not the slightest idea what she was going to say.

“I came to offer you my very warm sympathy with the grief you have so lately experienced.”

“My grief? I'm afraid I must be very dull; but I really do not understand.”

Already she felt at a disadvantage, and hesitated.

“I mean about the old man who died so suddenly—your old. . . retainer.”

Caswall's face relaxed something of its puzzled concentration.

“Oh, he was only a servant; and he had over-stayed his three-score and ten years by something like twenty years. He must have been ninety!”

“Still, as an old servant. . . “

Caswall's words were not so cold as their inflection.

“I never interfere with servants. He was kept on here merely because he had been so long on the premises. I suppose the steward thought it might make him unpopular if the old fellow had been dismissed.”

How on earth was she to proceed on such a task as hers if this was the utmost geniality she could expect? So she at once tried another tack—this time a personal one.

“I am sorry I disturbed you. I am really not unconventional—though certainly no slave to convention. Still there are limits. . . it is bad enough to intrude in this way, and I do not know what you can say or think of the time selected, for the intrusion.”

After all, Edgar Caswall was a gentleman by custom and habit, so he rose to the occasion.

“I can only say, Lady Arabella, that you are always welcome at any time you may deign to honour my house with your presence.”

She smiled at him sweetly.

“Thank you SO much. You DO put one at ease. My breach of convention makes me glad rather than sorry. I feel that I can open my heart to you about anything.”

Forthwith she proceeded to tell him about Oolanga and his strange suspicions of her honesty. Caswall laughed and made her explain all the details. His final comment was enlightening.

“Let me give you a word of advice: If you have the slightest fault to find with that infernal nigger, shoot him at sight. A swelled-headed nigger, with a bee in his bonnet, is one of the worst difficulties in the world to deal with. So better make a clean job of it, and wipe him out at once!”

“But what about the law, Mr. Caswall?”

“Oh, the law doesn’t concern itself much about dead niggers. A few more or less do not matter. To my mind it’s rather a relief!”

“I’m afraid of you,” was her only comment, made with a sweet smile and in a soft voice.

“All right,” he said, “let us leave it at that. Anyhow, we shall be rid of one of them!”

“I don’t love niggers any more than you do,” she replied, “and I suppose one mustn’t be too particular where that sort of cleaning up is concerned.” Then she changed in voice and manner, and asked genially: “And now tell me, am I forgiven?”

“You are, dear lady—if there is anything to forgive.”

As he spoke, seeing that she had moved to go, he came to the door with her, and in the most natural way accompanied her downstairs. He passed through the hall with her and down the avenue. As he went back to the house, she smiled to herself.

“Well, that is all right. I don’t think the morning has been altogether thrown away.”

And she walked slowly back to Diana’s Grove.

Adam Salton followed the line of the Brow, and refreshed his memory as to the various localities. He got home to Lesser Hill just as Sir Nathaniel was beginning lunch. Mr. Salton had gone to Walsall to keep an early appointment; so he was all alone. When the meal was over—seeing in Adam’s face that he had something to speak about—he followed into the study and shut the door.

When the two men had lighted their pipes, Sir Nathaniel began.

“I have remembered an interesting fact about Diana’s Grove—there is, I have long understood, some strange mystery about that house. It may be of some interest, or it may be trivial, in such a tangled skein as we are trying to unravel.”

“Please tell me all you know’ or suspect. To begin, then, of what sort is the mystery—physical, mental, moral, historical, scientific, occult? Any kind of hint will help me.”

“Quite right. I shall try to tell you what I think; but I have not put my thoughts on the subject in sequence, so you must forgive me if due order is not observed in my narration. I suppose you have seen the house at Diana’s Grove?”

“The outside of it; but I have that in my mind’s eye, and I can fit into my memory whatever you may mention.”

“The house is very old—probably the first house of some sort that stood there was in the time of the Romans. This was probably renewed—perhaps several times at later periods. The house stands, or, rather, used to stand here when Mercia was a kingdom—I do not suppose that the basement can be later than the Norman Conquest. Some years ago, when I was President of the Mercian Archaeological Society, I went all over it very carefully. This was when it was purchased by Captain March. The house had then been done up, so as to be suitable for the bride. The basement is very strong,—almost as strong and as heavy as if it had been intended as a fortress. There are a whole series of rooms deep underground. One of them in particular struck

me. The room itself is of considerable size, but the masonry is more than massive. In the middle of the room is a sunk well, built up to floor level and evidently going deep underground. There is no windlass nor any trace of there ever having been any—no rope—nothing. Now, we know that the Romans had wells of immense depth, from which the water was lifted by the ‘old rag rope’; that at Woodhull used to be nearly a thousand feet. Here, then, we have simply an enormously deep well-hole. The door of the room was massive, and was fastened with a lock nearly a foot square. It was evidently intended for some kind of protection to someone or something; but no one in those days had ever heard of anyone having been allowed even to see the room. All this is E PROPOS of a suggestion on my part that the well-hole was a way by which the White Worm (whatever it was) went and came. At that time I would have had a search made—even excavation if necessary—at my own expense, but all suggestions were met with a prompt and explicit negative. So, of course, I took no further step in the matter. Then it died out of recollection—even of mine.”

“Do you remember, sir,” asked Adam, “what was the appearance of the room where the well-hole was? Was there furniture—in fact, any sort of thing in the room?”

“The only thing I remember was a sort of green light—very clouded, very dim—which came up from the well. Not a fixed light, but intermittent and irregular—quite unlike anything I had ever seen.”

“Do you remember how you got into the well-room? Was there a separate door from outside, or was there any interior room or passage which opened into it?”

“I think there must have been some room with a way into it. I remember going up some steep steps; they must have been worn smooth by long use or something of the kind, for I could hardly keep my feet as I went up. Once I stumbled and nearly fell into the well-hole.”

“Was there anything strange about the place—any queer smell, for instance?”

“Queer smell—yes! Like bilge or a rank swamp. It was distinctly nauseating; when I came out I felt as if I had just been going to be sick. I shall try back on my visit and see if I can recall any more of what I saw or felt.”

“Then perhaps, sir, later in the day you will tell me anything you may chance to recollect.”

“I shall be delighted, Adam. If your uncle has not returned by then, I’ll join you in the study after dinner, and we can resume this interesting chat.”

CHAPTER XVII—THE MYSTERY OF “THE GROVE”

That afternoon Adam decided to do a little exploring. As he passed through the wood outside the gate of Diana’s Grove, he thought he saw the African’s face for an instant. So he went deeper into the undergrowth, and followed along parallel to the avenue to the house. He was glad that there was no workman or servant about, for he did not care that any of Lady Arabella’s people should find him wandering about her grounds. Taking advantage of the denseness of the trees, he came close to the house and skirted round it. He was repaid for his trouble, for on the far side of the house, close to where the rocky frontage of the cliff fell away, he saw Oolanga crouched behind the irregular trunk of a great oak. The man was so intent on watching someone, or something, that he did not guard against being himself watched. This suited Adam, for he could thus make scrutiny at will.

The thick wood, though the trees were mostly of small girth, threw a heavy shadow, so that the steep declension, in front of which grew the tree behind which the African lurked, was almost in darkness. Adam drew as close as he could, and was amazed to see a patch of light on the ground before him; when he realised what it was, he was determined, more than ever to follow on his quest. The nigger had a dark lantern in his hand, and was throwing the light down the steep incline. The glare showed a series of stone steps, which ended in a low-lying heavy iron door fixed against the side of the house. All the strange things he had heard from Sir Nathaniel, and all those, little and big, which he had himself noticed, crowded into his mind in a chaotic way. Instinctively he took refuge behind a thick oak stem, and set himself down, to watch what might occur.

After a short time it became apparent that the African was trying to find out what was behind the heavy door. There was no way of looking in, for the door fitted tight into the massive stone slabs. The only opportunity for the entrance of light was through a small hole between the great stones above the door. This hole was too high up to look through from the ground level. Oolanga, having tried standing tiptoe on the highest point near, and holding the lantern as high as he could, threw the light round the edges of the door to see if he could find anywhere a hole or a flaw in the metal through which he could obtain a glimpse. Foiled in this, he brought from the shrubbery a plank, which he leant against the top of the door and then climbed up with great dexterity. This did not bring him near enough to the window-hole to look in, or even to throw the light of the lantern through it, so he climbed down and carried the plank back to the place from which he had got it. Then he concealed himself near the iron door and waited, manifestly with the intent of remaining there till someone came near. Presently Lady Arabella, moving noiselessly through the shade, approached the door. When he saw her close enough to touch it, Oolanga stepped forward from his concealment, and spoke in a whisper, which through the gloom sounded like a hiss.

“I want to see you, missy—soon and secret.”

“What do you want?”

“You know well, missy; I told you already.”

She turned on him with blazing eyes, the green tint in them glowing like emeralds.

“Come, none of that. If there is anything sensible which you wish to say to me, you can see me here, just where we are, at seven o’clock.”

He made no reply in words, but, putting the backs of his hands together, bent lower and lower till his forehead touched the earth. Then he rose and went slowly away.

Adam Salton, from his hiding-place, saw and wondered. In a few minutes he moved from his place and went home to Lesser Hill, fully determined that seven o’clock would find him in some hidden place behind Diana’s Grove.

At a little before seven Adam stole softly out of the house and took the back-way to the rear of Diana’s Grove. The place seemed silent and deserted, so he took the opportunity of concealing himself near the spot whence he had seen Oolanga trying to investigate whatever was concealed behind the iron door. He waited, perfectly still, and at last saw a gleam of white passing soundlessly through the undergrowth. He was not surprised when he recognised the colour of Lady Arabella’s dress. She came close and waited, with her face to the iron door. From some place of concealment near at hand Oolanga appeared, and came close to her. Adam noticed, with surprised amusement, that over his shoulder was the box with the mongoose. Of course the African did not know that he was seen by anyone, least of all by the man whose property he had with him.

Silent-footed as he was, Lady Arabella heard him coming, and turned to meet him. It was somewhat hard to see in the gloom, for, as usual, he was all in black, only his collar and cuffs showing white. Lady Arabella opened the conversation which ensued between the two.

“What do you want? To rob me, or murder me?”

“No, to lub you!”

This frightened her a little, and she tried to change the tone.

“Is that a coffin you have with you? If so, you are wasting your time. It would not hold me.”

When a nigger suspects he is being laughed at, all the ferocity of his nature comes to the front; and this man was of the lowest kind.

“Dis ain’t no coffin for nobody. Dis box is for you. Somefin you lub. Me give him to you!”

Still anxious to keep off the subject of affection, on which she believed him to have become crazed, she made another effort to keep his mind elsewhere.

“Is this why you want to see me?” He nodded. “Then come round to the other door. But be quiet. I have no desire to be seen so close to my own house in conversation with a—a—a nigger like you!”

She had chosen the word deliberately. She wished to meet his passion with another kind. Such would, at all events, help to keep him quiet. In the deep gloom she could not see the anger which suffused his face. Rolling eyeballs and grinding teeth are, however, sufficient signs of anger to be decipherable in the dark. She moved round the corner of the house to her right. Oolanga was following her, when she stopped him by raising her hand.

“No, not that door,” she said; “that is not for niggers. The other door will do well enough for you!”

Lady Arabella took in her hand a small key which hung at the end of her watch-chain, and moved to a small door, low down, round the corner, and a little downhill from the edge of the Brow. Oolanga, in obedience to her gesture, went back to the iron door. Adam looked carefully at the mongoose box as the African went by, and was glad to see that it was intact. Unconsciously, as he looked, he fingered the key that was in his waistcoat pocket. When Oolanga was out of sight, Adam hurried after Lady Arabella.

CHAPTER XVIII—EXIT OOLANGA

The woman turned sharply as Adam touched her shoulder.

“One moment whilst we are alone. You had better not trust that nigger!” he whispered.

Her answer was crisp and concise:

“I don’t.”

“Forewarned is forearmed. Tell me if you will—it is for your own protection. Why do you mistrust him?”

“My friend, you have no idea of that man’s impudence. Would you believe that he wants me to marry him?”

“No!” said Adam incredulously, amused in spite of himself.

“Yes, and wanted to bribe me to do it by sharing a chest of treasure—at least, he thought it was—stolen from Mr. Caswall. Why do you distrust him, Mr. Salton?”

“Did you notice that box he had slung on his shoulder? That belongs to me. I left it in the gun-room when I went to lunch. He must have crept in and stolen it. Doubtless he thinks that it, too, is full of treasure.”

“He does!”

“How on earth do you know?” asked Adam.

“A little while ago he offered to give it to me—another bribe to accept him. Faugh! I am ashamed to tell you such a thing. The beast!”

Whilst they had been speaking, she had opened the door, a narrow iron one, well hung, for it opened easily and closed tightly without any creaking or sound of any kind. Within all was dark; but she entered as freely and with as little misgiving or restraint as if it had been broad daylight. For Adam, there was just sufficient green light from somewhere for him to see that there was a broad flight of heavy stone steps leading upward; but Lady Arabella, after shutting the door behind her, when it closed tightly without a clang, tripped up the steps lightly and swiftly. For an instant all was dark, but there came again the faint green light which enabled him to see the outlines of things. Another iron door, narrow like the first and fairly high, led into another large room, the walls of which were of massive stones, so closely joined together as to exhibit only one smooth surface. This presented the appearance of having at one time been polished. On the far side, also smooth like the walls, was the reverse of a wide, but not high, iron door. Here there was a little more light, for the high-up aperture over the door opened to the air.

Lady Arabella took from her girdle another small key, which she inserted in a keyhole in the centre of a massive lock. The great bolt seemed wonderfully hung, for the moment the small key was turned, the bolts of the great lock moved noiselessly and the iron doors swung open. On the stone steps outside stood Oolanga, with the mongoose box slung over his shoulder. Lady Arabella stood a little on one side, and the African, accepting the movement as an invitation, entered in an obsequious way. The moment, however, that he was inside, he gave a quick look around him.

“Much death here—big death. Many deaths. Good, good!”

He sniffed round as if he was enjoying the scent. The matter and manner of his speech were so revolting that instinctively Adam’s hand wandered to his revolver, and, with his finger on the trigger, he rested satisfied that he was ready for any emergency.

There was certainly opportunity for the nigger’s enjoyment, for the open well-hole was almost under his nose, sending up such a stench as almost made Adam sick, though Lady Arabella seemed not to mind it at all. It was like nothing that Adam had ever met with. He compared it with all the noxious experiences he had ever had—the drainage of war hospitals, of slaughter-houses, the refuse of dissecting rooms. None of these was like it, though it had something of them all, with, added, the sourness of chemical waste and the poisonous effluvium of the bilge of a water-logged ship whereon a multitude of rats had been drowned.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the negro noticed the presence of a third person—Adam Salton! He pulled out a pistol and shot at him, happily missing. Adam was himself usually a quick shot, but this time his mind had been on something else and he was not ready. However, he was quick to carry out an intention, and he was not a coward. In another moment both men were in grips. Beside them was the dark well-hole, with that horrid effluvium stealing up from its mysterious depths.

Adam and Oolanga both had pistols; Lady Arabella, who had not one, was probably the most ready of them all in the theory of shooting, but that being impossible, she made her effort in another way. Gliding forward, she tried to seize the African; but he eluded her grasp, just

missing, in doing so, falling into the mysterious hole. As he swayed back to firm foothold, he turned his own gun on her and shot. Instinctively Adam leaped at his assailant; clutching at each other, they tottered on the very brink.

Lady Arabella's anger, now fully awake, was all for Oolanga. She moved towards him with her hands extended, and had just seized him when the catch of the locked box—due to some movement from within—flew open, and the king-cobra-killer flew at her with a venomous fury impossible to describe. As it seized her throat, she caught hold of it, and, with a fury superior to its own, tore it in two just as if it had been a sheet of paper. The strength used for such an act must have been terrific. In an instant, it seemed to spout blood and entrails, and was hurled into the well-hole. In another instant she had seized Oolanga, and with a swift rush had drawn him, her white arms encircling him, down with her into the gaping aperture.

Adam saw a medley of green and red lights blaze in a whirling circle, and as it sank down into the well, a pair of blazing green eyes became fixed, sank lower and lower with frightful rapidity, and disappeared, throwing upward the green light which grew more and more vivid every moment. As the light sank into the noisome depths, there came a shriek which chilled Adam's blood—a prolonged agony of pain and terror which seemed to have no end.

Adam Salton felt that he would never be able to free his mind from the memory of those dreadful moments. The gloom which surrounded that horrible charnel pit, which seemed to go down to the very bowels of the earth, conveyed from far down the sights and sounds of the nethermost hell. The ghastly fate of the African as he sank down to his terrible doom, his black face growing grey with terror, his white eyeballs, now like veined bloodstone, rolling in the helpless extremity of fear. The mysterious green light was in itself a milieu of horror. And through it all the awful cry came up from that fathomless pit, whose entrance was flooded with spots of fresh blood. Even the death of the fearless little snake-killer—so fierce, so frightful, as if stained with a ferocity which told of no living force above earth, but only of the devils of the pit—was only an incident. Adam was in a state of intellectual tumult, which had no parallel in his experience. He tried to rush away from the horrible place; even the baleful green light, thrown up through the gloomy well-shaft, was dying away as its source sank deeper into the primeval ooze. The darkness was closing in on him in overwhelming density—darkness in such a place and with such a memory of it!

He made a wild rush forward—slipt on the steps in some sticky, acrid-smelling mass that felt and smelt like blood, and, falling forward, felt his way into the inner room, where the well-shaft was not.

Then he rubbed his eyes in sheer amazement. Up the stone steps from the narrow door by which he had entered, glided the white-clad figure of Lady Arabella, the only colour to be seen on her being blood-marks on her face and hands and throat. Otherwise, she was calm and unruffled, as when earlier she stood aside for him to pass in through the narrow iron door.

CHAPTER XIX—AN ENEMY IN THE DARK

Adam Salton went for a walk before returning to Lesser Hill; he felt that it might be well, not only to steady his nerves, shaken by the horrible scene, but to get his thoughts into some sort of order, so as to be ready to enter on the matter with Sir Nathaniel. He was a little embarrassed as to telling his uncle, for affairs had so vastly progressed beyond his original view that he felt a

little doubtful as to what would be the old gentleman's attitude when he should hear of the strange events for the first time. Mr. Salton would certainly not be satisfied at being treated as an outsider with regard to such things, most of which had points of contact with the inmates of his own house. It was with an immense sense of relief that Adam heard that his uncle had telegraphed to the housekeeper that he was detained by business at Walsall, where he would remain for the night; and that he would be back in the morning in time for lunch.

When Adam got home after his walk, he found Sir Nathaniel just going to bed. He did not say anything to him then of what had happened, but contented himself with arranging that they would walk together in the early morning, as he had much to say that would require serious attention.

Strangely enough he slept well, and awoke at dawn with his mind clear and his nerves in their usual unshaken condition. The maid brought up, with his early morning cup of tea, a note which had been found in the letter-box. It was from Lady Arabella, and was evidently intended to put him on his guard as to what he should say about the previous evening.

He read it over carefully several times, before he was satisfied that he had taken in its full import.

“DEAR MR. SALTON,

“I cannot go to bed until I have written to you, so you must forgive me if I disturb you, and at an unseemly time. Indeed, you must also forgive me if, in trying to do what is right, I err in saying too much or too little. The fact is that I am quite upset and unnerved by all that has happened in this terrible night. I find it difficult even to write; my hands shake so that they are not under control, and I am trembling all over with memory of the horrors we saw enacted before our eyes. I am grieved beyond measure that I should be, however remotely, a cause of this horror coming on you. Forgive me if you can, and do not think too hardly of me. This I ask with confidence, for since we shared together the danger—the very pangs—of death, I feel that we should be to one another something more than mere friends, that I may lean on you and trust you, assured that your sympathy and pity are for me. You really must let me thank you for the friendliness, the help, the confidence, the real aid at a time of deadly danger and deadly fear which you showed me. That awful man—I shall see him for ever in my dreams. His black, malignant face will shut out all memory of sunshine and happiness. I shall eternally see his evil eyes as he threw himself into that well-hole in a vain effort to escape from the consequences of his own misdoing. The more I think of it, the more apparent it seems to me that he had premeditated the whole thing—of course, except his own horrible death.

“Perhaps you have noticed a fur collar I occasionally wear. It is one of my most valued treasures—an ermine collar studded with emeralds. I had often seen the nigger's eyes gleam covetously when he looked at it. Unhappily, I wore it yesterday. That may have been the cause that lured the poor man to his doom. On the very brink of the abyss he tore the collar from my neck—that was the last I saw of him. When he sank into the hole, I was rushing to the iron door, which I pulled behind me. When I heard that soul-sickening yell, which marked his disappearance in the chasm, I was more glad than I can say that my eyes were spared the pain and horror which my ears had to endure.

“When I tore myself out of the negro's grasp as he sank into the well-hole; I realised what freedom meant. Freedom! Freedom! Not only from that noisome prison-house, which has now such a memory, but from the more noisome embrace of that hideous monster. Whilst I live, I shall always thank you for my freedom. A woman must sometimes express her gratitude;

otherwise it becomes too great to bear. I am not a sentimental girl, who merely likes to thank a man; I am a woman who knows all, of bad as well as good, that life can give. I have known what it is to love and to lose. But you must not let me bring any unhappiness into your life. I must live on—as I have lived—alone, and, in addition, bear with other woes the memory of this latest insult and horror. In the meantime, I must get away as quickly as possible from Diana's Grove. In the morning I shall go up to town, where I shall remain for a week—I cannot stay longer, as business affairs demand my presence here. I think, however, that a week in the rush of busy London, surrounded with multitudes of commonplace people, will help to soften—I cannot expect total obliteration—the terrible images of the bygone night. When I can sleep easily—which will be, I hope, after a day or two—I shall be fit to return home and take up again the burden which will, I suppose, always be with me.

“I shall be most happy to see you on my return—or earlier, if my good fortune sends you on any errand to London. I shall stay at the Mayfair Hotel. In that busy spot we may forget some of the dangers and horrors we have shared together. Adieu, and thank you, again and again, for all your kindness and consideration to me.

“ARABELLA MARSH.”

Adam was surprised by this effusive epistle, but he determined to say nothing of it to Sir Nathaniel until he should have thought it well over. When Adam met Sir Nathaniel at breakfast, he was glad that he had taken time to turn things over in his mind. The result had been that not only was he familiar with the facts in all their bearings, but he had already so far differentiated them that he was able to arrange them in his own mind according to their values. Breakfast had been a silent function, so it did not interfere in any way with the process of thought.

So soon as the door was closed, Sir Nathaniel began:

“I see, Adam, that something has occurred, and that you have much to tell me.”

“That is so, sir. I suppose I had better begin by telling you all I know—all that has happened since I left you yesterday?”

Accordingly Adam gave him details of all that had happened during the previous evening. He confined himself rigidly to the narration of circumstances, taking care not to colour events by any comment of his own, or any opinion of the meaning of things which he did not fully understand. At first, Sir Nathaniel seemed disposed to ask questions, but shortly gave this up when he recognised that the narration was concise and self-explanatory. Thenceforth, he contented himself with quick looks and glances, easily interpreted, or by some acquiescent motions of his hands, when such could be convenient, to emphasise his idea of the correctness of any inference. Until Adam ceased speaking, having evidently come to an end of what he had to say with regard to this section of his story, the elder man made no comment whatever. Even when Adam took from his pocket Lady Arabella's letter, with the manifest intention of reading it, he did not make any comment. Finally, when Adam folded up the letter and put it, in its envelope, back in his pocket, as an intimation that he had now quite finished, the old diplomatist carefully made a few notes in his pocket-book.

“Your narrative, my dear Adam, is altogether admirable. I think I may now take it that we are both well versed in the actual facts, and that our conference had better take the shape of a mutual exchange of ideas. Let us both ask questions as they may arise; and I do not doubt that we shall arrive at some enlightening conclusions.”

“Will you kindly begin, sir? I do not doubt that, with your longer experience, you will be able to dissipate some of the fog which envelops certain of the things which we have to consider.”

“I hope so, my dear boy. For a beginning, then, let me say that Lady Arabella’s letter makes clear some things which she intended—and also some things which she did not intend. But, before I begin to draw deductions, let me ask you a few questions. Adam, are you heart-whole, quite heart-whole, in the matter of Lady Arabella?”

His companion answered at once, each looking the other straight in the eyes during question and answer.

“Lady Arabella, sir, is a charming woman, and I should have deemed it a privilege to meet her—to talk to her—even—since I am in the confessional—to flirt a little with her. But if you mean to ask if my affections are in any way engaged, I can emphatically answer ‘No!’—as indeed you will understand when presently I give you the reason. Apart from that, there are the unpleasant details we discussed the other day.”

“Could you—would you mind giving me the reason now? It will help us to understand what is before us, in the way of difficulty.”

“Certainly, sir. My reason, on which I can fully depend, is that I love another woman!”

“That clinches it. May I offer my good wishes, and, I hope, my congratulations?”

“I am proud of your good wishes, sir, and I thank you for them. But it is too soon for congratulations—the lady does not even know my hopes yet. Indeed, I hardly knew them myself, as definite, till this moment.”

“I take it then, Adam, that at the right time I may be allowed to know who the lady is?”

Adam laughed a low, sweet laugh, such as ripples from a happy heart.

“There need not be an hour’s, a minute’s delay. I shall be glad to share my secret with you, sir. The lady, sir, whom I am so happy as to love, and in whom my dreams of life-long happiness are centred, is Mimi Watford!”

“Then, my dear Adam, I need not wait to offer congratulations. She is indeed a very charming young lady. I do not think I ever saw a girl who united in such perfection the qualities of strength of character and sweetness of disposition. With all my heart, I congratulate you. Then I may take it that my question as to your heart-wholeness is answered in the affirmative?”

“Yes; and now, sir, may I ask in turn why the question?”

“Certainly! I asked because it seems to me that we are coming to a point where my questions might be painful to you.”

“It is not merely that I love Mimi, but I have reason to look on Lady Arabella as her enemy,” Adam continued.

“Her enemy?”

“Yes. A rank and unscrupulous enemy who is bent on her destruction.”

Sir Nathaniel went to the door, looked outside it and returned, locking it carefully behind him.

CHAPTER XX—METABOLISM

“Am I looking grave?” asked Sir Nathaniel inconsequently when he re-entered the room.

“You certainly are, sir.”

“We little thought when first we met that we should be drawn into such a vortex. Already we are mixed up in robbery, and probably murder, but—a thousand times worse than all the crimes in the calendar—in an affair of ghastly mystery which has no bottom and no end—with forces of the most unnerving kind, which had their origin in an age when the world was different from the

world which we know. We are going back to the origin of superstition—to an age when dragons tore each other in their slime. We must fear nothing—no conclusion, however improbable, almost impossible it may be. Life and death is hanging on our judgment, not only for ourselves, but for others whom we love. Remember, I count on you as I hope you count on me.”

“I do, with all confidence.”

“Then,” said Sir Nathaniel, “let us think justly and boldly and fear nothing, however terrifying it may seem. I suppose I am to take as exact in every detail your account of all the strange things which happened whilst you were in Diana’s Grove?”

“So far as I know, yes. Of course I may be mistaken in recollection of some detail or another, but I am certain that in the main what I have said is correct.”

“You feel sure that you saw Lady Arabella seize the negro round the neck, and drag him down with her into the hole?”

“Absolutely certain, sir, otherwise I should have gone to her assistance.”

“We have, then, an account of what happened from an eye-witness whom we trust—that is yourself. We have also another account, written by Lady Arabella under her own hand. These two accounts do not agree. Therefore we must take it that one of the two is lying.”

“Apparently, sir.”

“And that Lady Arabella is the liar!”

“Apparently—as I am not.”

“We must, therefore, try to find a reason for her lying. She has nothing to fear from Oolanga, who is dead. Therefore the only reason which could actuate her would be to convince someone else that she was blameless. This ‘someone’ could not be you, for you had the evidence of your own eyes. There was no one else present; therefore it must have been an absent person.”

“That seems beyond dispute, sir.”

“There is only one other person whose good opinion she could wish to keep—Edgar Caswall. He is the only one who fills the bill. Her lies point to other things besides the death of the African. She evidently wanted it to be accepted that his falling into the well was his own act. I cannot suppose that she expected to convince you, the eye-witness; but if she wished later on to spread the story, it was wise of her to try to get your acceptance of it.”

“That is so!”

“Then there were other matters of untruth. That, for instance, of the ermine collar embroidered with emeralds. If an understandable reason be required for this, it would be to draw attention away from the green lights which were seen in the room, and especially in the well-hole. Any unprejudiced person would accept the green lights to be the eyes of a great snake, such as tradition pointed to living in the well-hole. In fine, therefore, Lady Arabella wanted the general belief to be that there was no snake of the kind in Diana’s Grove. For my own part, I don’t believe in a partial liar—this art does not deal in veneer; a liar is a liar right through. Self-interest may prompt falsity of the tongue; but if one prove to be a liar, nothing that he says can ever be believed. This leads us to the conclusion that because she said or inferred that there was no snake, we should look for one—and expect to find it, too.

“Now let me digress. I live, and have for many years lived, in Derbyshire, a county more celebrated for its caves than any other county in England. I have been through them all, and am familiar with every turn of them; as also with other great caves in Kentucky, in France, in Germany, and a host of other places—in many of these are tremendously deep caves of narrow aperture, which are valued by intrepid explorers, who descend narrow gullets of abysmal depth—and sometimes never return. In many of the caverns in the Peak I am convinced that

some of the smaller passages were used in primeval times as the lairs of some of the great serpents of legend and tradition. It may have been that such caverns were formed in the usual geologic way—bubbles or flaws in the earth's crust—which were later used by the monsters of the period of the young world. It may have been, of course, that some of them were worn originally by water; but in time they all found a use when suitable for living monsters.

“This brings us to another point, more difficult to accept and understand than any other requiring belief in a base not usually accepted, or indeed entered on—whether such abnormal growths could have ever changed in their nature. Some day the study of metabolism may progress so far as to enable us to accept structural changes proceeding from an intellectual or moral base. We may lean towards a belief that great animal strength may be a sound base for changes of all sorts. If this be so, what could be a more fitting subject than primeval monsters whose strength was such as to allow a survival of thousands of years? We do not know yet if brain can increase and develop independently of other parts of the living structure.

“After all, the mediaeval belief in the Philosopher's Stone which could transmute metals, has its counterpart in the accepted theory of metabolism which changes living tissue. In an age of investigation like our own, when we are returning to science as the base of wonders—almost of miracles—we should be slow to refuse to accept facts, however impossible they may seem to be.

“Let us suppose a monster of the early days of the world—a dragon of the prime—of vast age running into thousands of years, to whom had been conveyed in some way—it matters not—a brain just sufficient for the beginning of growth. Suppose the monster to be of incalculable size and of a strength quite abnormal—a veritable incarnation of animal strength. Suppose this animal is allowed to remain in one place, thus being removed from accidents of interrupted development; might not, would not this creature, in process of time—ages, if necessary—have that rudimentary intelligence developed? There is no impossibility in this; it is only the natural process of evolution. In the beginning, the instincts of animals are confined to alimentation, self-protection, and the multiplication of their species. As time goes on and the needs of life become more complex, power follows need. We have been long accustomed to consider growth as applied almost exclusively to size in its various aspects. But Nature, who has no doctrinaire ideas, may equally apply it to concentration. A developing thing may expand in any given way or form. Now, it is a scientific law that increase implies gain and loss of various kinds; what a thing gains in one direction it may lose in another. May it not be that Mother Nature may deliberately encourage decrease as well as increase—that it may be an axiom that what is gained in concentration is lost in size? Take, for instance, monsters that tradition has accepted and localised, such as the Worm of Lambton or that of Spindleston Heugh. If such a creature were, by its own process of metabolism, to change much of its bulk for intellectual growth, we should at once arrive at a new class of creature—more dangerous, perhaps, than the world has ever had any experience of—a force which can think, which has no soul and no morals, and therefore no acceptance of responsibility. A snake would be a good illustration of this, for it is cold-blooded, and therefore removed from the temptations which often weaken or restrict warm-blooded creatures. If, for instance, the Worm of Lambton—if such ever existed—were guided to its own ends by an organised intelligence capable of expansion, what form of creature could we imagine which would equal it in potentialities of evil? Why, such a being would devastate a whole country. Now, all these things require much thought, and we want to apply the knowledge usefully, and we should therefore be exact. Would it not be well to resume the subject later in the day?”

“I quite agree, sir. I am in a whirl already; and want to attend carefully to what you say; so that I may try to digest it.”

Both men seemed fresher and better for the “easy,” and when they met in the afternoon each of them had something to contribute to the general stock of information. Adam, who was by nature of a more militant disposition than his elderly friend, was glad to see that the conference at once assumed a practical trend. Sir Nathaniel recognised this, and, like an old diplomatist, turned it to present use.

“Tell me now, Adam, what is the outcome, in your own mind, of our conversation?”

“That the whole difficulty already assumes practical shape; but with added dangers, that at first I did not imagine.”

“What is the practical shape, and what are the added dangers? I am not disputing, but only trying to clear my own ideas by the consideration of yours—”

So Adam went on:

“In the past, in the early days of the world, there were monsters who were so vast that they could exist for thousands of years. Some of them must have overlapped the Christian era. They may have progressed intellectually in process of time. If they had in any way so progressed, or even got the most rudimentary form of brain, they would be the most dangerous things that ever were in the world. Tradition says that one of these monsters lived in the Marsh of the East, and came up to a cave in Diana’s Grove, which was also called the Lair of the White Worm. Such creatures may have grown down as well as up. They MAY have grown into, or something like, human beings. Lady Arabella March is of snake nature. She has committed crimes to our knowledge. She retains something of the vast strength of her primal being—can see in the dark—has the eyes of a snake. She used the nigger, and then dragged him through the snake’s hole down to the swamp; she is intent on evil, and hates some one we love. Result. . . “

“Yes, the result?”

“First, that Mimi Watford should be taken away at once—then—”

“Yes?”

“The monster must be destroyed.”

“Bravo! That is a true and fearless conclusion. At whatever cost, it must be carried out.”

“At once?”

“Soon, at all events. That creature’s very existence is a danger. Her presence in this neighbourhood makes the danger immediate.”

As he spoke, Sir Nathaniel’s mouth hardened and his eyebrows came down till they met. There was no doubting his concurrence in the resolution, or his readiness to help in carrying it out. But he was an elderly man with much experience and knowledge of law and diplomacy. It seemed to him to be a stern duty to prevent anything irrevocable taking place till it had been thought out and all was ready. There were all sorts of legal cruxes to be thought out, not only regarding the taking of life, even of a monstrosity in human form, but also of property. Lady Arabella, be she woman or snake or devil, owned the ground she moved in, according to British law, and the law is jealous and swift to avenge wrongs done within its ken. All such difficulties should be—must be—avoided for Mr. Salton’s sake, for Adam’s own sake, and, most of all, for Mimi Watford’s sake.

Before he spoke again, Sir Nathaniel had made up his mind that he must try to postpone decisive action until the circumstances on which they depended—which, after all, were only problematical—should have been tested satisfactorily, one way or another. When he did speak, Adam at first thought that his friend was wavering in his intention, or “funking” the

responsibility. However, his respect for Sir Nathaniel was so great that he would not act, or even come to a conclusion on a vital point, without his sanction.

He came close and whispered in his ear:

“We will prepare our plans to combat and destroy this horrible menace, after we have cleared up some of the more baffling points. Meanwhile, we must wait for the night—I hear my uncle’s footsteps echoing down the hall.”

Sir Nathaniel nodded his approval.