

# **Two Strangers**

BY  
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## CHAPTER I.

“AND who is this young widow of yours whom I hear so much about? I understand Lucy’s rapture over any stranger; but you, too, mother—”

“I too—well, there is no particular witchcraft about it; a nice young woman has as much chance with me as with any one, Ralph—”

“Oh, if it’s only a nice young woman—”

“It’s a great deal more,” said Lucy. “Why, Miss Jones at the school is a nice young woman—don’t you be taken in by mother’s old-fashioned stilts. She is a darling—she is as nice as nice can be. She’s pretty, and she’s good, and she’s clever. She has read a lot, and seen a lot, and been everywhere, and knows heaps and heaps of people, and yet just as simple and as nice as if she had never been married, never had a baby, and was just a girl like the rest of us—Mother! there is nothing wrong in what I said?” Lucy suddenly cried, stopping short and blushing all over with the innocent alarm of a youthfulness which had not been trained to modern modes of speech.

“Nothing wrong, certainly,” said the mother, with a half smile; “but—there is no need for entering into all these details.”

“They would have found out immediately, though,” said Lucy, with a lowered voice, “that there was—Tiny, you know.”

The scene was a drawing-room in a country house looking out upon what was at this time of year the rather damp and depressing

prospect of a park, with some fine trees and a great breadth of very green, very mossy, very wet grass. It was only October, though the end of the month; and in the middle of the day, in the sunshine, the trees, in all their varied colors, were a fine sight, cheerful and almost exhilarating, beguiling the eye; but now the sun was gone, the leaves were falling in little showers whenever the faintest breath of air arose, and where the green turf was not veiled by their many colored remnants, it was green with that emerald hue which means only wet; one knew as one gazed across it that one's foot would sink in the spongy surface, and wet, wet would be the boot, the skirt which touched it; the men in their knickerbockers, or those carefully turned up trousers—which we hear are the fashion in the driest streets of Paris and New York—suffered comparatively little. The brushwood was all wet, with blobs of moisture on the long brambles and drooping leaves. The park was considered a beautiful park, though not a very large one, but it was melancholy itself to look out for hours together upon that green expanse in such an evening. It was not a bad evening either. There was no rain; the clouds hung low, but as yet had given forth no shower. The air was damp but yet brisk. There was a faint yellow glimmer of what might have been sunset in the sky.

The windows in the Wradisley drawing-rooms were large; one of them, a vast, shallow bow, which seemed to admit the outside into the interior, rather than to enlighten the interior with the view of what was outside. Mrs. Wradisley sat within reach of, but not too near, a large, very red fire—a fire which was like the turf outside, the growth of generations, or at least had not at all the air of having been lighted to-day or any recent day. It did not flame, but glowed steadily, adding something to the color of the room, but not much to the light. Later in the season, when larger parties

assembled, there was tea in the hall for the sportsmen and the ladies who waited for them; but Mrs. Wradisley thought the hall draughty, and much preferred the drawing-room, which was overfurnished after the present mode of drawing-rooms, but at least warm, and free from draughts. She was working—knitting with white pins, or else making mysterious chains and bridges in white wool with a crochet-hook, her eyes being supposed to be not very strong, and this kind of industry the best adapted for them. As to what Lucy was doing, that defies description. She was doing everything and nothing. She had something of a modern young lady's contempt for every kind of needlework, and, then, along with that, a great admiration for it as something still more superior than the superiority of idleness. A needle is one of the things that has this double effect. It is the scorn of a great number of highly advanced, very cultured and superior feminine people; but yet here and there will arise one, still more advanced and cultured, who loves the old-fashioned weapon, and speaks of it as a sacred implement of life. Lucy followed first one opinion and then another. She had half a dozen pieces of work about, begun under the influence of one class of her friends, abandoned under that of another. She had a little studio, too, where she painted and carved, and executed various of the humbler decorative arts, which, perhaps, to tell the truth, she enjoyed more than art proper; but these details of the young lady's life may be left to show themselves where there is no need of such vanities. Lucy was, at all events, whatever her other qualities might be, a most enthusiastic friend.

“Well, I suppose we shall see her, and find out, as Lucy says, for ourselves—not that it is of much importance,” the brother said, who had begun this conversation.

“Oh! but it is of a great deal of importance,” cried Lucy. “Mrs. Nugent is my chief friend. She is mother’s prime favorite. She is the nicest person in the neighborhood. She is here constantly, or I am there. If you mean not to like her, you might as well, without making any fuss about it, go away.”

“Lucy!” cried Mrs. Wradisley, moved to indignation, and dropping all the white fabric of wool on her knees, “your brother—and just come home after all these years!”

“What nonsense! Of course I don’t mean that in the least,” Lucy cried. “Ralph knows—*of course*, I would rather have him than—all the friends in the world.”

There was a faltering note, however, in this profession. Why should she like Ralph better than all the friends in the world? He was her brother, that was true; but he knew very little of Lucy, and Lucy knew next to nothing of him; he had been gone since she was almost a child—he came back now with a big beard and a loud voice and a step which rang through the house. It was evident he thought her, if not a child, yet the most unimportant feminine person who did not count; and why should she prefer him to her own nice friends, who were soft of voice and soft of step, and made much of her, and thought as she did? It is acknowledged universally that in certain circumstances, when the man is her lover, a girl prefers that man to all the rest of the creation; but why, when it is only your brother Raaf, and it may really be said that you don’t know him—why should you prefer him to your own beloved friends? Lucy did not ask herself this question—she said what she knew it was the right thing to say, though with a faltering in her voice. And Ralph, who fortunately did not care in the least, took no notice of what Lucy said. He liked the little girl, his little sister,

well enough; but it did not upset the equilibrium of the world in the very least whether she preferred him or not—if he had thought on the subject he would probably have said, “More shame to her, the little insensible thing!” but he did not take the trouble to give it a passing thought.

“I’ve got to show Bertram the neighborhood,” he said; “let him see we’re not all muffs or clowns in the country. He has a kind of notion that is about what the English aborigines are—and I daresay it’s true, more or less.”

“Oh, Raaf!” cried Lucy, raising her little smooth head.

“Well, it’s natural enough. One doesn’t meet the cream of the cream in foreign parts; unless you’re nothing but a sportsman, or a great swell doing it as the right thing, the most of the fellows you meet out there are loafers or blackguards, more or less.”

“It is a pity to form an estimate from blackguards,” said Mrs. Wradisley, with a smile; “but that, I suppose, I may take as an exaggeration too. We don’t see much of that kind here. Mr. Bertram is much mistaken if he thinks—”

“Oh, don’t be too hasty, mother,” said Ralph. “We know the breed; our respectable family has paid toll to the devil like other folks since it began life, which is rather a long time ago. After a few hundred years you get rather proud of your black sheep. I’m something of the kind myself,” he added, in his big voice.

Mrs. Wradisley once more let the knitting drop in her lap. “You do yourself very poor justice, Raaf—no justice at all, in fact. You are not spotless, perhaps, but I hope that black—”

“Whitey-brown,” said her son. “I don’t care for the distinction; but one white flower is perhaps enough in a family that never went in for exaggerated virtue—eh? Ah, yes—I know.”

These somewhat incoherent syllables attended the visible direction of Mrs. Wradisley’s eyes toward the door, with the faintest lifting of her eyelids. The door had opened and some one had come in. And yet it is quite inadequate to express the entrance of the master of the house by such an expression. His foot made very little sound, but this was from some quality of delicacy and refinement in his tread, not from any want of dignity or even impressiveness in the man. He was dressed just like the other men so far as appeared—in a grey morning suit, about which there was nothing remarkable. Indeed, it would have been against the perfection of the man had there been anything remarkable in his dress—but it was a faultless costume, whereas theirs were but common coats and waistcoats from the tailor’s, lined and creased by wear and with marks in them of personal habit, such, for instance, as that minute burnt spot on Raaf’s coat-pocket, which subtly announced, though it was a mere speck, the thrusting in of a pipe not entirely extinguished, to that receptacle. Mr. Wradisley, I need not say, did not smoke; he did not do anything to disturb the perfect outline of an accomplished gentleman, refined and fastidious, which was his natural aspect. To smell of tobacco, or indeed of anything, would have put all the fine machinery of his nature out of gear. He hated emotion as he hated—what shall I say?—musk or any such villainous smell; he was always *point devise*, body and soul. It is scarcely necessary to say that he was Mr. Wradisley and the head of the house. He had indeed a Christian name, by which he was called by his mother, brother, and sister, but not conceivably by any one else. Mr. Wradisley was as

if you had said Lord, when used to him—nay, it was a little more, for lord is *tant soit peu* vulgar and common as a symbol of rank employed by many other people, whereas Mr., when thus elevated, is unique; the commonest of addresses, when thus sublimated and etherealized, is always the grandest of all. He was followed into the room by a very different person, a person of whom the Wradisley household did not quite know what to make—a friend of Ralph’s who had come home with him from the deserts and forests whence that big sportsman and virtuous prodigal had come. This stranger’s name was Bertram. He had not the air of the wilds about him as Ralph Wradisley had. He was said to be a bigger sportsman even than Ralph, and a more prodigious traveler; but this was only Ralph’s report, who was always favorable to his friends; and Mr. Bertram looked more like a man about town than an African traveler, except that he was burnt very brown by exposure, which made his complexion, once fair, produce a sort of false effect in contrast with his light hair, which the sun had rather diminished than increased in color. Almost any man would have looked noisy and rough who had the disadvantage to come into a room after Mr. Wradisley; but Bertram bore the comparison better than most. Ralph Wradisley had something of the aspect of a gamekeeper beside both of them, though I think the honest fellow would have been the first to whom a child or injured person would have turned. The ladies made involuntary mental comments upon them as the three stood together.

“Oh, if Raaf were only a little less rough!” his mother breathed in her heart. Lucy, I think, was most critical of Bertram, finding in him, on the whole, something which neither of her brothers possessed, though he must have been forty at the very least, and therefore capable of exciting but little interest in a girl’s heart.

“I have been showing your friend my treasures,” said Mr. Wradisley, with a slight turn of his head toward his brother, “and I am delighted to find we have a great many tastes in common. There is a charm in sympathy, especially when it is so rare, on these subjects.”

“You could not expect Raaf to know about your casts and things, Reginald,” said Mrs. Wradisley, precipitately. “He has been living among such very different scenes.”

“Raaf!” said Mr. Wradisley, slightly elevating his eyebrows. “My dear mother, could you imagine I was referring in any way to Raaf?”

“Never mind, Reg, I don’t take it amiss,” said the big sportsman, with a laugh out of his beard.

There was, however, a faint color on his browned cheeks. It is well that a woman’s perceptions should be quick, no doubt, but if Mrs. Wradisley had not been jealous for her younger son this very small household jar need not have occurred. Mr. Wradisley put it right with his natural blandness.

“We all have our pet subjects,” he said; “you too, mother, as much as the worst of us. Is the time of tea over, or may I have some?”

“Mr. Wradisley’s casts are magnificent,” cried the stranger. “I should have known nothing about them but for a wild year or two I spent in Greece and the islands. A traveler gets a sniff of everything. Don’t you recollect, Wradisley, the Arabs and their images at—”

The name was not to be spelt by mere British faculties, and I refrain.

“Funny lot of notions,” said Raaf, “I remember; pretty little thing or two, however, I should like to have brought for Lucy—just the things a girl would like—but Bertram there snapped them all up before I had a chance—confounded knowing fellow, always got before me. You come down on him, Lucy; it’s his fault if I have so few pretty things for you.”

“I am very well contented, Raaf,” said Lucy, prettily. As a matter of fact the curiosities Ralph had brought home had been chiefly hideous ivory carvings of truly African type, which Lucy, shuddering, had put away in a drawer, thanking him effusively, but with averted eyes.

“There were two or three very pretty little Tanagra figurine among the notions,” said Bertram. “I am sorry Miss Wradisley had not her share of them—they’re buried in my collections in some warehouse or other, and probably will never see the light.”

“Ah, Tanagra!” said Mr. Wradisley, with a momentary gleam of interest. He laid his hand not unkindly on his little sister’s shoulder, as she handed him, exactly as he liked it, his cup of tea. “It is the less matter, for Lucy would not have appreciated them,” he said.

“When,” said Mrs. Wradisley, with a little gasp, “do you expect your friends, Reginald? October is getting on, and the ladies that belong to them will lie heavy on our hands if we have bad weather.”

“Oh, the guns,” said Mr. Wradisley. “Don’t call them my friends, mother—friends of the house, friends of the covers, if you like. Not so great a nuisance as usual this year, since Raaf is here, but no intimates of mine.”

“We needn’t stand upon words, Reginald. They are coming, anyhow, and I never remember dates.”

“Useless to attempt it. You should make a memorandum of everything, which is much more sure. I can tell you at once.”

He took a note-book from his pocket, unerringly, without the usual scuffle to discover in which pocket it was, and, drawing a chair near his mother, began to read out the names of the guests. Then there ensued a little discussion as to where they were to be placed; to Mrs. Wradisley proposing the yellow room for one couple who had already, in Mr. Wradisley’s mind, been settled in the green. It was not a very great difference, but the master of the house had his way. A similar little argument, growing fainter and fainter on the mother’s side, was carried on over the other names. In every case Mr. Wradisley had his way.

“I am going to run down to the park gates—that is, to the village,—I mean I am going to see Mrs. Nugent,” said Lucy, “while mother and Reginald settle all these people. Raaf, will you come?”

“And I, too?” said Bertram, with a pleasant smile. He had a pleasant smile, and he was such a gentleman, neither rough like Raaf, nor over-dainty like Reginald. Lucy was very well content he should come too.

## CHAPTER II.

IT was a lingering and pleasant walk with many little pauses in it and much conversation. Lucy was herself the cause of some of them, for it was quite necessary that here and there Mr. Bertram should be made to stop, turn round, and look at the view. I will not pretend that those views were any very great things. Bertram, who had seen all the most famous scenes of earth, was not much impressed by that point so dear to the souls of the Wradisbury people, where the church tower came in, or that other where the glimmer of the pond under the trees, reflecting all their red and gold, moved the natives to enthusiasm. It was a pretty, soft, kindly English landscape, like a good and gentle life, very reposeful and pleasant to see, but not dramatic or exciting. It was Ralph, though he was to the manner born, who was, or pretended to be, the most impatient of these tame but agreeable vistas. "It don't say much, your landscape, Lucy," he said. "Bertram's seen everything there is to see. A stagnant pool and a church tower are not so grand to him as to—" Probably he intended to say us, with a little, after all, of the native's proud depreciation of a scene which, though homely, appeals to himself so much; but he stopped, and wound up with "a little ignoramus like you."

"I am not so fastidious, I suppose. I think it's delightful," said Bertram. "After all the dissipations of fine scenery, there's nothing like a home landscape. I've seen the day when we would have given all we possessed for a glimmer of a church tower, or, still better, a bit of water. In the desert only to think of that would be a good thing."

“Oh, in the desert,” said Ralph, with a sort of indulgent acknowledgment that in some points home did commend itself to the most impartial mind. But he too stopped and called upon his friend to observe where the copse spread dark into the sunset sky—the best covert within twenty miles—about which also Bertram was very civil, and received the information with great interest. “Plenty of wild duck round the corner of that hill in the marshy part,” said Ralph. “By Jove! we should have a heavy bag when we have it all to ourselves.”

“Capital ground, and great luck to be the first,” said Mr. Bertram. He was certainly a nice man. He seemed to like to linger, to talk of the sunset, to enjoy himself in the fresh but slightly chill air of the October evening. Lucy’s observation of him was minute. A little wonder whether he might be the man—not necessarily *her* man, but the ideal man—blew like a quiet little breeze through her youthful spirit. It was a breeze which, like the actual breeze of the evening, carried dead leaves with it, the rags of past reputation and visions, for already Lucy had asked herself this question in respect to one or two other men who had not turned out exactly as at first they seemed. To be sure, this one was old—probably forty or so—and therefore was both better and worse than her previous studies; for at such an age he must of course have learnt everything that experience could teach, and on the other hand did not matter much, having attained to antiquity. Still, it certainly gave a greater interest to the walk that he was here.

“After all,” said Ralph, “you gave us no light, Lucy, as to who this widow was.”

“You speak as if she were like old Widow Thrapton in the village,” cried Lucy. “A widow!—she says it’s a term of reproach, as if a woman had tormented her husband to death.”

“But she is a widow, for you said so—and who is she?” said the persistent Ralph.

“He is like the little boy in ‘Helen’s Babies,’” said Lucy, turning to her other companion. “He always wants to see the wheels go round, whatever one may say.”

“I feel an interest in this mysterious widow, too,” said Bertram, with a laugh.

It was all from civility to keep Ralph in countenance, she felt sure.

“Who is she?” said that obstinate person.

“I can tell you what she is,” cried Lucy, with indignant warmth. “She must be older than I am, I suppose, for there’s Tiny, but she doesn’t look it. She has the most lovely complexion, and eyes like stars, and brown hair—none of your golden stuff, which always looks artificial now. Hers might be almost golden if she liked, but she is not one to show off. And she is the nicest neighbor that ever was—comes up to the house just when one is dull and wants stirring up, or sends a note or a book, or to ask for something. She likes to do all sorts of things for you, and she’s so generous and nice and natural that she likes you to do things for her, which is so much, much more uncommon! She says, thank heaven, she is not unselfish; and, though it sounds strange,” said Lucy, with vehemence, “I know exactly what she means.”

“Not unselfish?” said Ralph. “By George! that’s a new quality. I thought it was always the right thing to say of a woman that she was unselfish; but all that doesn’t throw any light upon the lady. Isn’t she somebody’s sister or cousin or aunt? Had she a father, had she a mother?—that sort of thing, you know. A woman doesn’t come and settle herself in a neighborhood without some credentials—nor a man either, so far as I know.”

“I don’t know what you mean by credentials. She was not introduced to us by any stupid people, if that is what you mean. We just found her out for ourselves.”

Ralph gave a little whistle at this, which made Lucy very angry. “When you go out to Africa or—anywhere,” she cried, “do you take credentials? And who is to know whether you are what you call yourself? I suppose you say you’re a Wradisley of Wradisbury. Much the black kings must know about a little place in Hants!”

“The black kings don’t stand on that sort of thing,” said Ralph, “but the mother does, or so I supposed.”

“I ought to take the unknown lady’s part,” said Mr. Bertram. “You’ve all been very kind to me, and I’m not a Bertram of—anywhere in particular. I have not got a pedigree in my pocket. Perhaps I might have some difficulty in making out my family tree.”

“Oh, Mr. Bertram!” cried Lucy, in deprecation, as if that were an impossible thing.

“I might always call myself of the Ellangowan family, to be sure,” he said, with a laugh.

Now Lucy did not at all know what he meant by the Ellangowan family. She was not so deeply learned in her Scott as I hope every other girl who reads this page is, and she was not very quick, and perhaps would not have caught the meaning if she had been ever so familiar with "Guy Mannering." She thought Ellangowan a very pretty name, and laid it up in her memory, and was pleased to think that Mr. Bertram had thus, as it were, produced his credentials and named his race. I don't know whether Ralph also was of the same opinion. At all events they went on without further remark on this subject. The village lay just outside the park gates on the right side of a pretty, triangular bit of common, which was almost like a bit of the park, with little hollows in it filled with a wild growth of furze and hawthorn and blackberry, the long brambles arching over and touching the level grass. There was a pretty bit of greensward good for cricket and football, and of much consequence in the village history. The stars had come out in the sky, though it was still twilight when they emerged from the shadow of the trees to this more open spot; and there were lights in the cottage windows and in the larger shadow of the rectory, which showed behind the tall, slim spire of the church. It was a cheerful little knot of human life and interest under the trees, Nature, kindly but damp, mantling everything with greenness up to the very steps of the cottage doors, some of which were on the road itself without any interval of garden; and little irregular gleams of light indicating the scarcely visible houses. Lucy, however, did not lead the way toward the village. She went along the other side of the common toward a house more important than the cottages, which stood upon a little elevation, with a grassy bank and a few moderate-sized trees.

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