

FRED FRED

THE MYSTERY
OF THE
RAVENSPURS

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The Mystery of the Ravenspurs

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	11
CHAPTER IV	14
CHAPTER V	17
CHAPTER VI	20
CHAPTER VII	23
CHAPTER VIII	25
CHAPTER IX	28
CHAPTER X	30
CHAPTER XI	34
CHAPTER XII	37
CHAPTER XIII	40
CHAPTER XIV	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

The Mystery of the Ravenspurs A Romance and Detective Story of Thibet and England

CHAPTER I THE SHADOW OF A FEAR

A grand old castle looks out across the North Sea, and fishermen toiling on the deep catch the red flash from Ravenspur Point, as their forefathers have done for many generations.

The Ravenspurs and their great granite fortress have made history between them. Every quadrangle and watch-tower and turret has its legend of brave deeds and bloody deeds, of fights for the king and the glory of the flag. And for five hundred years there has been no Ravenspur who has not acquitted himself like a man. Theirs is a record to be proud of.

Time has dealt lightly with the home of the Ravenspurs. It is probably the most perfect mediæval castle in the country. The moat and the drawbridge are still intact; the portcullis might be worked by a child. And landwards the castle looks over a fair domain of broad acres where the orchards bloom and flourish and the red beeves wax fat in the pastures.

A quiet family, a handsome family, a family passing rich in the world's goods, they are strong and brave – a glorious chronicle behind them and no carking cares ahead.

Surely, then, the Ravenspurs should be happy and contented beyond most men. Excepting the beat of the wings of the Angel of Death, that comes to all sooner or later, surely no sorrow dwelt there that the hand of time could fail to soothe.

And yet over them hung the shadow of a fear.

No Ravenspur had ever slunk away from any danger, however great, so long as it was tangible; but there was something here that turned the stoutest heart to water, and caused strong men to start at their own shadows.

For five years now the curse had lain heavy on the house of Ravenspur.

It had come down upon them without warning; at first in the guise of a series of accidents and misfortunes, until gradually it became evident that some cunning and remorseless enemy was bent upon exterminating the Ravenspurs root and branch.

There had been no warning given, but one by one the Ravenspurs died mysteriously, horribly, until at last no more than seven of the family remained. The North-country shuddered in speaking of the ill-starred family. The story had found its way into print.

Scotland Yard had taken the case in hand; but still the hapless Ravenspurs died, mysteriously murdered, and even some of those who survived had tales to unfold of marvelous escapes from destruction.

The fear grew on them like a hunting madness. From first to last not one single clue, however small, had the murderers left behind. Family archives were ransacked and personal histories explored with a view to finding some forgotten enemy who had originated this vengeance. But the Ravenspurs had ever been generous and kind, honorable to men and true to women, and none could lay a finger on the blot.

In the whole history of crime no such weird story had ever been told before. Why should this blow fall after the lapse of all these years? What could the mysterious foe hope to gain by this merciless slaughter? And to struggle against the unseen enemy was in vain.

As the maddening terror deepened, the most extraordinary precautions were taken to baffle the assassin. Eighteen months ago the word had gone out for the gathering of the family at the castle.

They had come without followers or retainers of any kind; every servant had been housed outside the castle at nightfall, and the grim old fortress had been placed in a state of siege.

They waited upon themselves, they superintended the cooking of their own food, no strange feet crossed the drawbridge. When the portcullis was raised, the most ingenious burglar would have failed to find entrance. At last the foe was baffled; at last the family was safe. There were no secret passages, no means of entry; and here salvation lay.

Alas for fond hopes! Within the last year and a half three of the family had perished in the same strange and horrible fashion.

There was Richard Ravenspur, a younger son of Rupert, the head of the house, with his wife and boy. Richard Ravenspur had been found dead in his bed, poisoned by some lemonade; his wife had walked into the moat in the darkness; the boy had fallen from one of the towers into a stone quadrangle and been instantly killed.

The thing was dreadful, inexplicable to a degree. The enemy who was doing this thing was in the midst of them. And yet no stranger passed those iron gates; none but Ravenspurs dwelt within the walls. Eye looked into eye and fell again, ashamed that the other should know the suspicions racking each poor distracted brain.

And there were only seven of them now – seven pallid, hollow-cheeked wretches, almost longing for the death they dreaded.

There was Rupert Ravenspur, the head of the family, a fine, handsome, white-headed man, who had distinguished himself in the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny. There was his son Gordon who some day might succeed him; there was Gordon's wife and his daughter Vera. Then there was Geoffrey Ravenspur, the orphan son of one Jasper Ravenspur, who had fallen under the scourge two years before.

And also there was Marion Ravenspur, the orphan daughter of Charles Ravenspur, another son who had died in India five years before of cholera. Mrs. Charles was there, the child of an Indian prince, and from her Marion had inherited the dark beauty and soft glorious eyes that made her beloved of the whole family.

A strange tale surely, a hideous nightmare, and yet so painfully realistic. One by one they were being cut off by the malignant destroyer, and ere long the family would be extinct. It seemed impossible to fight against the desolation that always struck in the darkness, and never struck in vain.

Rupert Ravenspur looked out from the leads above the castle to the open sea, and from thence to the trim lawns and flower beds away to the park, where the deer stood knee-deep in the bracken.

It was a fair and perfect picture of a noble English homestead, far enough removed apparently from crime and violence. And yet!

A deep sigh burst from the old man's breast; his lips quivered. The shadow of that awful fear was in his eyes. Not that he feared for himself, for the snows of seventy years lay upon his head, and his life's work was done.

It was others he was thinking of. The bright bars of the setting sun shone on a young and graceful couple below coming towards the moat. A tender light filled old Ravenspur's eyes.

Then he started as a gay laugh reached his ears. The sound caught him almost like a blow. Where had he heard a laugh like that before? It seemed strangely out of place. And yet those two were young, and they loved one another. Under happier auspices, Geoffrey Ravenspur would some day come into the wide acres and noble revenues, and take his cousin Vera to wife.

"May God spare them!" Ravenspur cried aloud. "Surely the curse must burn itself out some time, or the truth must come to light. If I could only live to know that they were happy!"

The words were a fervent prayer. The dying sun that turned the towers and turrets of the castle to a golden glory fell on his white, quivering face. It lit up the agony of the strong man with despair upon him. He turned as a hand lay light as thistledown on his arm.

"Amen with all my heart, dear grandfather," a gentle voice murmured. "I could not help hearing what you said."

Ravenspur smiled mournfully. He looked down into a pure young face, gentle and placid, like that of a madonna, and yet full of strength. The dark brown eyes were so clear that the white soul seemed to gleam behind them. There was Hindoo blood in Marion Ravenspur's veins, but she bore no trace of the fact. And, out of the seven surviving members of that ill-fated race, Marion was the most beloved. All relied upon her, all trusted her. In the blackest hour her courage never faltered; she never bowed before the unseen terror.

Ravenspur turned upon her almost fiercely.

"We must save Vera and Geoffrey," he said. "They must be preserved. The rest of us are as nothing by comparison. The whole future of our race lies with those two young people. Watch over them, Marion; shield Vera from every harm. I know that she loves you. Swear that you will protect her from every evil!"

"There is no occasion to swear anything," Marion said, in her clear, sweet voice. "Dear, don't you know that I am devoted heart and soul to your interests? When my parents died, and I elected to come here in preference to returning to my mother's people, you received me with open arms. Do you suppose that I could ever forget the love and affection that have been poured upon me? If I can save Vera she is already saved. But why do you speak like this to-day?"

Ravenspur gave a quick glance around him.

"Because my time has come," he whispered hoarsely. "Keep this to yourself, Marion, for I have told nobody but you. The black assassin is upon me. I wake at nights with fearful pains at my heart – I cannot breathe. I have to fight for my life, as my brother Charles fought for his two years ago. To-morrow morning I may be found dead in my bed – as Charles was. Then there will be an inquest, and the doctors will be puzzled, as they were before."

"Grandfather! You are not afraid?"

"Afraid! I am glad – glad, I tell you. I am old and careworn, and the suspense is gradually sapping my senses. Better death, swift and terrible, than that. But not a word of this to the rest, as you love me!"

CHAPTER II

THE WANDERER RETURNS

The hour was growing late, and the family were dining in the great hall. Rupert Ravenspur sat at the head of the table, with Gordon's wife opposite him. The lovers sat smiling and happy side by side. Across the table Marion beamed gently upon the company. Nothing ever seemed to eclipse her quiet gaiety; she was the life and soul of the party. There was something angelic about the girl as she sat there clad in soft diaphanous white.

Lamps gleamed on the fair damask, on the feathery daintiness of flowers, and on the lush purple and gold and russet of grapes and peaches. From the walls long lines of bygone Ravenspurs looked down – fair women in hoops and farthingale, men in armor. There was a flash of color from the painted roof.

Presently the soft-footed servants would quit the castle for the night, for under the new order of things nobody slept in the castle excepting the family. Also, it was the solemn duty of each servitor to taste every dish as it came to table. A strange precaution, but necessary in the circumstances.

For the moment the haunting terror was forgotten. Wines red and white gleamed and sparkled in crystal glasses. Rupert Ravenspur's worn, white face relaxed. They were a doomed race and they knew it; yet laughter was there, a little saddened, but eyes brightened as they looked from one to another.

By and by the servants began to withdraw. The cloth was drawn in the old-fashioned way, a long row of decanters stood before the head of the house and was reflected in the shining, brown pool of mahogany. Big log fires danced and glowed from the deep ingle nooks; from outside came the sense of the silence.

An aged butler stood before Ravenspur with a key on a salver.

"I fancy that is all, sir," he said.

Ravenspur rose and made his way along the corridor to the outer doorway. Here he counted the whole of the domestic staff, carefully passed the drawbridge and then the portcullis was raised. Ravenspur Castle and its inhabitants were cut off from the outer world. Nobody could molest them till morning.

And yet the curl of a bitter smile was on Ravenspur's face as he returned to the dining-hall. Even in the face of these precautions two of the garrison had gone down before the unseen hand of the assassin. There was some comfort in the reflection that the outer world was barred off, but it was futile, childish, in vain.

The young people, with Mrs. Charles, had risen from the table and had gathered on the pile of skins and cushions in one of the ingle nooks. Gordon Ravenspur was sipping his claret and holding a cigar with a hand that trembled.

Hardy man as he was, the shadow lay upon him also; indeed, it lay upon them all. If the black death failed to strike, then madness would come creeping in its track. Thus it was that evening generally found the family all together. There was something soothing in the presence of numbers.

They were talking quietly, almost in whispers. Occasionally a laugh would break from Vera, only to be suppressed with a smile of apology. Ravenspur looked fondly into the blue eyes of the dainty little beauty whom they all loved so dearly.

"I hope I didn't offend you, grandfather," she said.

In that big hall voices sounded strained and loud. Ravenspur smiled.

"Nothing you could do would offend me," he said. "It may be possible that a kindly Providence will permit me to hear the old roof ringing with laughter again. It may be, perhaps, that that is reserved for strangers when we are all gone."

"Only seven left," Gordon murmured.

"Eight, father," Vera suggested. She looked up from the lounge on the floor with the flicker of the wood fire in her violet eyes. "Do you know I had a strange dream last night. I dreamt that Uncle Ralph came home again. He had a great black bundle in his arms, and when the bundle burst open it filled the hall with a gleaming light, and in the center of that light was the clue to the mystery."

Ravenspur's face clouded. Nobody but Vera would have dared to allude to his son Ralph in his presence.

For over Ralph Ravenspur hung the shadow of disgrace – a disgrace he had tried to shift on to the shoulders of his dead brother Charles, Marion's father. Of that dark business none knew the truth but the head of the family. For twenty years he had never mentioned his erring son's name.

"It is to be hoped that Ralph is dead," he said harshly.

A somber light gleamed in his eyes. Vera glanced at him half timidly. But she knew how deeply her grandfather loved her, and this gave her courage to proceed. "I don't like to hear you talk like that," she said. "It is no time to be harsh or hard on anybody. I don't know what he did, but I have always been sorry for Uncle Ralph. And something tells me he is coming home again. Grandfather, you would not turn him away?"

"If he were ill, if he were dying, if he suffered from some grave physical affliction, perhaps not. Otherwise – "

Ravenspur ceased to talk. The brooding look was still in his eyes; his white head was bent low on his breast.

Marion's white fingers touched his hand caressingly. The deepest bond of sympathy existed between these two. And at the smile in Marion's eye Ravenspur's face cleared.

"You would do all that is good and kind," Marion said. "You cannot deceive me: oh, I know you too well for that. And if Uncle Ralph came now!"

Marion paused, and the whole group looked one to the other with startled eyes. With nerves strung tightly like theirs, the slightest deviation from the established order of things was followed by a feeling of dread and alarm. And now, on the heavy silence of the night, the great bell gave clamorous and brazen tongue.

Ravenspur started to his feet.

"Strange that anyone should come at this time of night," he said. "No, Gordon, I will go. There can be no danger, for this is tangible."

He passed along the halls and passages till he came to the outer oak. He let down the portcullis.

"Come into the light," he cried, "and let me see who you are."

A halting, shuffling step advanced, and presently the gleam of the hall lantern shone down upon the face of a man whose features were strangely seamed and scarred. It seemed as if the whole of his visage had been scored and carved in criss-cross lines until not one inch of uncontaminated flesh remained.

His eyes were closed; he came forward with fumbling, outstretched hands as if searching for some familiar object. The features were expressionless, but this might have been the result of those cruel scars. But the whole aspect of the man spoke of dogged, almost pathetic, determination.

"You look strange and yet familiar to me," said Ravenspur. "Who are you and whence do you come?"

"I know you," the stranger replied in a strangled whisper. "I could recognize your voice anywhere. You are my father."

"And you are Ralph, Ralph, come back again!"

There was horror, indignation, surprise in the cry. The words rang loud and clear, so loud and clear that they reached the dining-hall and brought the rest of the party hurrying out into the hall.

Vera came forward with swift, elastic stride. With a glance of shuddering pity at the scarred face she laid a hand on Ravenspur's arm.

"My dream," she whispered. "It may be the hand of God. Oh, let him stay!"

"There is no place here for Ralph Ravenspur," the old man cried.

The outcast still fumbled his way forward. A sudden light of intelligence flashed over Gordon as he looked curiously at his brother.

"I think, sir," he said, "that my brother is suffering from some great affliction. Ralph, what is it? Why do you feel for things in that way?"

"I must," the wanderer replied. "I know every inch of the castle. I could find my way in the darkest night over every nook and corner. Father, I have come back to you. I was only to come back to you if I were in sore need or if I was deeply afflicted. Look at me! Does my face tell you nothing?"

"Your face is – is dreadful. And, as for your eyes, I cannot see them."

"You cannot see them," Ralph said in that dreadful, thrilling, strangled whisper, "because I have no sight; because I am blind."

Without a word Ravenspur caught his unhappy son by the hand and led him to the dining-hall, the family following in awed silence.

CHAPTER III

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

The close clutch of the silence lay over the castle like the restless horror that it was. The caressing drowsiness of healthy slumber was never for the hapless Ravenspurs now. They clung round the ingle nook till the last moment; they parted with a sigh and a shudder, knowing that the morrow might find one face missing, one voice silenced for ever.

Marion alone was really cheerful; her smiling face, her gentle courage were as the cool breath of the north wind to the others. But for her, they would have gone mad with the haunting horror long since.

She was one of the last to go. She still sat pensive in the ingle, her hands clasped behind her head, her eyes gazing with fascinated astonishment at Ralph Ravenspur.

In some strange, half-defined fashion it seemed to her that she had seen a face scarred and barred like that before. And in the same vague way the face reminded her of her native India.

It was a strong face, despite the blight that suffering had laid upon it. The lips were firm and straight, the sightless eyes seemed to be seeking for something, hunting as a blind wolf might have done. The long, slim, damp fingers twitched convulsively; feeling upwards and around as if in search of something.

Marion shuddered as she imagined those hooks of steel pressed about her throat, choking the life out of her.

"Where are you going to sleep?" Ravenspur asked abruptly.

"In my old room," Ralph replied. "Nobody need trouble about me. I can find my way about the castle as well as if I had my eyes. After all I have endured, a blanket on the floor will be a couch of down."

"You are not afraid of the family terror?"

Ralph laughed. He laughed hard down in his throat, chuckling horribly.

"I am afraid of nothing," he said; "if you only knew what I know you would not wish to live. I tell you I would sit and see my right arm burnt off with slow fire if I could wipe out the things I have seen in the last five years! I heard of the family fetish at Bombay, and that was why I came home. I prefer a slumbering hell to a roaring one."

He spoke as if half to himself. His words were enigmas to the interested listeners; yet, wild as they seemed, they were cool and collected.

"Some day you shall tell us your adventures," Ravenspur said not unkindly, "how you lost your sight, and whence came those strange disfigurements."

"That you will never know," Ralph replied. "Ah, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our narrow and specious philosophy. There are some things it is impossible to speak of, and my trouble is one of them. Only to one man could I mention it, and whether he is alive or dead I do not know."

Marion rose. The strangely uttered words made her feel slightly hysterical. She bent over Ravenspur and kissed him fondly. Moved by a strong impulse of pity, she would have done the same by her uncle Ralph, but that he seemed to divine her presence and her intention. The long, slim hands went up.

"You must not kiss me, my child," he said. "I am not fit to be touched by pure lips like yours. Good-night."

Marion turned away, chilled and disappointed. She wondered why Ralph spoke like that, why he shuddered at her approach as if she had been an unclean thing. But in that house of singular happenings one strange matter more or less was nothing.

"The light of my eyes," Ravenspur murmured. "After Vera, the creature I love best on earth. What should we do without her?"

"What, indeed?" Ralph said quietly. "I cannot see, but I can feel what she is to all of you. Good-night, father, and thank you."

Ravenspur strode off with a not unkindly nod. As a matter of fact, he was more moved by the return of the wanderer and his evident sufferings and misfortunes than he cared to confess. He brooded over these strange things till at length he lapsed into troubled and uneasy slumber.

The intense gripping silence deepened. Ralph Ravenspur still sat in the ingle with his face bent upon the glowing logs as if he could see, and as if he was seeking for some inspiration in the sparkling crocus flame.

Then without making the slightest noise, he crept across the hall, feeling his way along with his finger-tips to the landing above.

He had made no idle boast. He knew every inch of the castle. Like a cat he crept to his own room, and there, merely discarding his coat and boots, he took a blanket from the bed.

Into the corridor he stepped and then, lying down under the hangings of Cordova leather, wrapped himself up cocoon fashion in his blanket and dropped into a sound sleep. The mournful silence brooded, the rats scratched behind the oaken paneled walls.

Then out of the throat of the darkness came a stifled cry. It was the fighting rattle made by the strong man suddenly deprived of the power to breathe.

Again it came, and this time more loudly, with a ring of despair in it. In the dead silence it seemed to fill the whole house, but the walls were thick, and beyond the corridor there was no cognizance of anything being in the least wrong.

But the man in the blanket against the arras heard it and struggled to his feet. A long period of vivid personal danger had sharpened his senses. His knowledge of woodcraft enabled him to locate the cry to a yard.

"My father," he whispered; "I am only just in time."

He felt his way rapidly, yet noiselessly, along the few feet between his resting-place and Ravenspur's room. Imminent as the peril was, he yet paused to push his blanket out of sight. As he came to the door of Ravenspur's room the cry rose higher. He stooped and then his fingers touched something warm.

"Marion," he said; "I can catch the subtle fragrance of your hair."

The girl swallowed a scream. She was trembling from head to foot with fear and excitement. It was dark, the cry from within was despairing, the intense horror of it was dreadful.

"Yes, yes," she whispered hoarsely. "I was lying awake and I heard it. And that good old man told me to-day that his time was coming. I – I was going to rouse the house. The door is locked."

"Do nothing of the sort. Stand aside."

The voice was low but commanding. Marion obeyed mechanically. With great strength and determination Ralph flung himself against the door. At the second assault the rusty iron bolt gave and the door flew open.

Inside, Ravenspur lay on his bed. By his bedside a nightlight cast a feeble pallid ray. There was nobody in the room besides Ravenspur himself. He lay back absolutely rigid, a yellow hue was over his face like a painted mask, his eyes were wide open, his lips twitched convulsively. Evidently he was in some kind of cataleptic fit and his senses had not deserted him.

He was powerless to move and made no attempt to do so. The man was choking to death and yet his limbs were rigid. A sickly sweet odor filled the room and caused Ralph to double up and gasp for breath. It was as if the whole atmosphere was drenched with a fine spray of chloroform. Marion stood in the doorway like a fascinated white statue of fear and despair.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What is that choking smell?"

Ralph made no reply; he was holding his breath hard. There was a queer grinning smile on his face as he turned toward the window.

The fumbling clutching long hands rested for a moment on Ravenspur's forehead, and the next moment there was a sound of smashing glass, as with his naked fists Ralph beat in the lozenge-shaped windows.

A quick cool draught of air rushed through the room, and the figure on the bed ceased to struggle.

"Come in," said Ralph. "There is no danger now."

Marion entered. She was trembling from head to foot; her face was like death.

"What is it, what is it?" she cried. "Uncle Ralph, do you know what it is?"

"That is a mystery," Ralph replied. "There is some fiend at work here. I only guessed that the sickly odor was the cause of the mischief. You are better, sir?"

Ravenspur was sitting up in bed. The color had come back to his lips; he no longer struggled to breathe.

"I am all right," he said. His eyes beamed affectionately on Marion. "Ever ready and ever quick, child, you saved my life from that nameless horror."

"It was Uncle Ralph," said Marion. "I heard your cry, but Uncle Ralph was here as soon as I was. And it was a happy idea of his to break the window."

"It was that overpowering drug," said Ravenspur. "What it is and where it came from must always remain a mystery. This is a new horror to haunt me – and yet there were others who died in their beds mysteriously. I awoke to find myself choking; I was stifled by that sweet-smelling stuff; I could feel that my heart was growing weaker. But go, my child; you will catch your death of cold. Go to bed."

With an unsteady smile Marion disappeared. As she closed the door behind her, Ravenspur turned and grasped his son's wrist fiercely.

"Do you know anything of this?" he demanded. "You are blind, helpless; yet you were on the spot instantly. Do you know anything of this, I say?"

Ralph shook his head.

"It was good luck," he said. "And how should I know anything? Ah, a blind man is but a poor detective."

Yet as Ralph passed to his strange quarters, there was a queer look on his face. The long lean claws were crooked as if they were fastened about the neck of some enemy, some foe to the death.

"The hem of the mystery," he muttered. "Patience and prudence, and the day shall come when I shall have it by the throat, and such a lovely throat, too!"

CHAPTER IV

101 BRANT STREET

There was nothing about the house to distinguish it from its stolid and respectable neighbors. It had a dingy face, woodwork painted a dark red with the traditional brass knocker and bell-pull. The windows were hung with curtains of the ordinary type, the Venetian blinds were half down, which in itself is a sign of middle-class respectability. In the center of the red door was a small brass plate bearing the name of Dr. Sergius Tchigorsky.

Not that Dr. Tchigorsky was a medical practitioner in the ordinary sense of the word. No neatly appointed "pillbox" ever stood before 101; no patient ever passed the threshold.

Tchigorsky was a savant and a traveler to boot; a man who dealt in strange out-of-the-way things, and the interior of his house would have been a revelation to the top-hatted, frock-coated doctors and lawyers and City men who elected to make their home in Brant Street, W.

The house was crammed with curiosities and souvenirs of travel from basement to garret. A large sky-lighted billiard-room at the back of the house had been turned into a library and laboratory combined.

And here, when not traveling, Tchigorsky spent all his time, seeing strange visitors from time to time, Mongolians, Hindoos, natives of Tibet – for Tchigorsky was one of the three men who had penetrated to the holy city of Lassa, and returned to tell the tale.

The doctor came into his study from his breakfast, and stood ruminating, rubbing his hands before the fire. In ordinary circumstances he would have been a fine man of over six feet in height.

But a cruel misfortune had curved his spine, while his left leg dragged almost helplessly behind him, his hands were drawn up as if the muscles had been cut and then knotted up again.

Tchigorsky had entered Lassa five years ago as a god who walks upright. When he reached the frontier six months later he was the wreck he still remained. And of those privations and sufferings Tchigorsky said nothing. But there were times when his eyes gleamed and his breath came short and he pined for the vengeance yet to be his.

As to his face, it was singularly strong and intellectual. Yet it was disfigured with deep seams checkered like a chessboard. We have seen something like it before, for the marks were identical with those that disfigured Ralph Ravenspur and made his face a horror to look upon.

A young man rose from the table where he was making some kind of an experiment. He was a fresh-colored Englishman, George Abell by name, and he esteemed it a privilege to call himself Tchigorsky's secretary.

"Always early and always busy," Tchigorsky said. "Is there anything in the morning papers that is likely to interest me, Abell?"

"I fancy so," Abell replied thoughtfully. "You are interested in the Ravenspur case?"

A lurid light leapt into the Russian's eyes. He seemed to be strangely moved. He paced up and down the room, dragging his maimed limb after him.

"Never more interested in anything in my life," he said. "You know as much of my past as any man, but there are matters, experiences unspeakable. My face, my ruined frame! Whence come these cruel misfortunes? That secret will go down with me to the grave. Of that I could speak to one man alone, and I know not whether that man is alive or dead."

Tchigorsky's words trailed off into a rambling incoherent murmur. He was far away with his own gloomy and painful thoughts. Then he came back to earth with a start. He stood with his back to the fireplace, contemplating Abell.

"I am deeply interested in the Ravenspur case, as you know," he said. "A malignant fiend is at work yonder – a fiend with knowledge absolutely supernatural. You smile! I myself have seen the

powers of darkness doing the bidding of mortal man. All the detectives in Europe will never lay hands upon the destroyer of the Ravenspurs. And yet, in certain circumstances, I could."

"Then, in that case, sir, why don't you?"

"Do it? I said in certain circumstances. I have part of a devilish puzzle; the other part is in the hands of a man who may be dead. I hold half of the bank-note; somebody else has the other moiety. Until we can come together, we are both paupers. If I can find that other man, and he has the nerve and the pluck he used to possess, the curse of the Ravenspurs will cease. But, then, I shall never see my friend again."

"But you might solve the problem alone."

"Impossible. That man and myself made a most hazardous expedition in search of dreadful knowledge. That formula we found. For the purposes of safety, we divided it. And then we were discovered. Of what followed I dare not speak. I dare not even think."

"I escaped from my dire peril, but I cannot hope that my comrade was so fortunate. He must be dead. And, without him, I am as powerless as if I knew nothing. I have no proof. Yet I know quite well who is responsible for those murders at Ravenspur."

Abell stared at his chief in astonishment. He knew Tchigorsky too well to doubt the evidence of his simple word. The Russian was too strong a man to boast.

"You cannot understand," he said. "It is impossible to understand without the inner knowledge that I possess, and even my knowledge is not perfect. Were I to tell the part I know I should be hailed from one end of England to the other as a madman. I should be imprisoned for malignant slander. But if the other man turned up – if only the other man should turn up!"

Tchigorsky broke into a rambling reverie again. When he emerged to mundane matters once more he ordered Abell to read the paragraph relating to the latest phase of the tragedy of the lost Ravenspur.

"It runs," said Abell, "'Another Strange Affair at Ravenspur Castle. The mystery of this remarkable case still thickens. Late on Wednesday night Mr. Rupert Ravenspur, the head of the family, was awakened by a choking sensation and a total loss of breath. On attempting to leave his bed, the unfortunate gentleman found himself unable to move."

"He states that the room appeared to be filled with a fine spray of some sickly, sweet drug or liquid that seemed to act upon him as chloroform does on a subject with a weak heart. Mr. Ravenspur managed to cry out, but the vapor held him down, and was slowly stifling him –"

"Ah," Tchigorsky cried. "Ah, I thought so. Go on!"

His eyes were gleaming; his whole face glistened with excitement.

"Providentially the cry reached the ears of another of the Ravenspurs. This gentleman burst open his father's door, and noticing the peculiar, pungent odor, had the good sense to break a window and admit air into the room."

"This prompt action was the means of saving the life of the victim, and it is all the more remarkable because it was carried out by a Mr. Ralph Ravenspur, a blind gentleman, who had just returned from foreign parts."

A cry – a scream broke from Tchigorsky's lips. He danced about the room like a madman. For the time being it was impossible for the astonished secretary to determine whether this was joy or anguish.

"You are upset about something, sir," he said.

Tchigorsky recovered himself by a violent effort that left him trembling like a reed swept in the wind. He gasped for breath.

"It was the madness of an overwhelming joy!" he cried. "I would cheerfully have given ten years of my life for this information. Abell, you will have to go to Ravenspur for me to-day."

Abell said nothing. He was used to these swift surprises.

"You are to see this Ralph Ravenspur, Abell," continued Tchigorsky. "You are not to call at the castle; you are to hang about till you get a chance of delivering my message unseen. The mere fact that Ralph Ravenspur is blind will suffice for a clue to his identity. Look up the time-table!"

Abell did so. He found a train to land him at Biston Junction, some ten miles from his destination. Half an hour later he was ready to start. From an iron safe Tchigorsky took a small object and laid it in Abell's hand.

"Give him that," he said. "You are simply to say: 'Tchigorsky – Danger,' and come away, unless Ralph Ravenspur desires speech with you. Now, go. And as you value your life, do not lose that casket."

It was a small brass box no larger than a cigarette case, rusty and tarnished, and covered with strange characters, evidently culled from some long-forgotten tongue.

CHAPTER V

A RAY OF LIGHT

A sense of expectation, an uneasy feeling of momentous events about to happen, hung over the doomed Ravenspurs. For once, Marion appeared to feel the strain. Her face was pale, and, though she strove hard to regain the old gentle gaiety, her eyes were red and swollen with weeping.

All through breakfast she watched Ravenspur in strange fascination. He seemed to have obtained some kind of hold over her. Yet nothing could be more patient, dull, and stolid than the way in which he proceeded with the meal. He appeared to dwell in an unseen world of his own; the stirring events of the previous night had left no impression on him whatever.

For the most part, they were a sad and silent party. The terror that walked by night and day was stealing closer to them; it was coming in a new and still more dreadful form. Accident or the intervention of Providence had averted a dire tragedy; but it would come again.

Ravenspur made light of the matter. He spoke of the danger as something past. Yet it was impossible wholly to conceal the agitation that filled him. He saw Marion's pale, sympathetic face; he saw the heavy tears in Vera's eyes, and a dreadful sense of his absolute impotence came upon him.

"Let us forget it," he said almost cheerfully. "Let us think no more of the matter. No doubt, science can explain this new mystery."

The speaker's sightless eyes were turned upwards; he seemed to be thinking aloud rather than addressing the company generally. Marion turned as if something had stung her.

"Uncle Ralph knows something that he conceals from us," she cried.

Ralph smiled. Yet he had the air of one who is displeased with himself.

"I know many things that are mercifully concealed from pure natures like yours," he said. "But as to what happened last night I am as much in the dark as any of you. Ah, if I were not blind!"

A strained silence followed. One by one the company rose until the room was deserted, save for Ralph Ravenspur and his nephew Geoffrey. The handsome lad's face was pale, his lips quivered.

"I am dreadfully disappointed, uncle," he observed.

"Meaning from your tone that you are disappointed with me, Geoff. Why?"

"Because you spoke at first as if you understood things. And then you professed to be as ignorant as the rest of us. Oh, it is awful! I – I would not care so much if I were less fond of Vera than I am. I love her; I love her with my whole heart and soul. If you could only see the beauty of her face you would understand."

"And yet when she kisses me good-night I am never sure that it is not for the last time. I feel that I must wake up presently to find that all is an evil dream. And we can do nothing, nothing, nothing but wait and tremble and – die."

Ralph had no reply; indeed there was no reply to this passionate outburst. The blind man rose from the table and groped his way to the door with those long hands that seemed to be always feeling for something like the tentacles of an octopus.

"Come with me to your grandfather's room," he said. "I want you to lend me your eyes for a time."

Geoffrey followed willingly. The bed room was exactly as Ravenspur had quitted it, for as yet the housemaid had not been there.

"Now look round you carefully," said Ralph. "Look for something out of the common. It may be a piece of rag, a scrap of paper, a spot of grease, or a dab of some foreign substance on the carpet. Is there a fire laid here?"

"No," Geoffrey replied. "The grate is a large open one. I will see what I can find."

The young fellow searched minutely. For some time no reward awaited his pains. Then his eyes fell upon the hearthstone.

"I can only see one little thing," he said.

"In a business like this, there are no such matters as little things," Ralph replied. "A clue that might stand on a pin's point often leads to great results. Tell me what it is that attracts your attention."

"A bronze stain on the hearthstone. It is about the size of the palm of one's hand. It looks very like a piece of glue dabbed down."

"Take a knife and scrape it up," said Ralph. He spoke slowly and evidently under excitement well repressed. "Wrap it in your handkerchief and give it to me. Has the stuff any particular smell?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey. "It has a sickly sweet odor. I am sure that I never smelt anything like it before."

"Probably not. There, I have no further need of your services, and I know that Vera is waiting for you. One word before you go – you are not to say a single word to a soul about this matter; not a single soul, mind. And now I do not propose to detain you any longer."

Geoffrey retired with a puzzled air. When the echo of his footsteps had died away, Ralph rose and crept out upon the leads. He was shivering with excitement; there was a look of eager expectation, almost of triumph, on his face.

He felt his way along the leads until he came to a group of chimneys, about the center one of which he fumbled with his hands for some time.

Then the look of triumph on his face grew more marked and stronger.

"Assurance doubly sure," he whispered. His voice croaked hoarsely with excitement. "If I had only somebody here whom I could trust! If I told anybody here whom I suspected they would rise like one person, and hurl me into the moat. And I can do no more than suspect. Patience, patience, and yet patience."

From the terrace came the sound of fresh young voices. They were those of Vera and Geoffrey talking almost gaily as they turned their steps toward the granite cliffs. For the nerves of youth are elastic and they throw off the strain easily.

They walked along side by side until they came to the cliffs. Here the rugged ramparts rose high with jagged indentations and rough hollows. There were deep cups and fissures in the rocks where a regiment of soldiers might lie securely hidden. For miles the gorse was flushed with its golden glory.

"Let us sit down and forget our troubles," said Geoffrey. "How restful the time if we could sail away in a ship, Vera, away to the ends of the earth, where we could hide ourselves from this cruel vendetta and be at peace. What use is the Ravenspur property to us when we are doomed to die?"

Vera shuddered slightly and the exquisite face grew pale.

"They might spare us," she said plaintively. "We are young and we have done no harm to anybody. And yet I have not lost all faith. I feel certain that Heaven above us will not permit this hideous slaughter to continue."

She laid her trembling fingers in Geoffrey's hand, and he drew her close to him and kissed her.

"It seems hard to look into your face and doubt it, dearest," he said. "Even the fiend who pursues us would hesitate to destroy you. But I dare not, I must not, think of that. If you are taken away I do not want to live."

"Nor I either, Geoff. Oh, my feelings are similar to yours!"

The dark violet eyes filled with tears, the fresh breeze from the sea ruffled Vera's fair hair and carried her sailor hat away up the cliff. It rested, perched upon a gorse bush overhanging one of the ravines or cups in the rock. As Geoffrey ran to fetch the hat he looked over.

A strange sight met his astonished gaze. The hollow might have been a small stone quarry at some time. Now it was lined with grass and moss, and in the center of the cup, which had no fissure or passage of any kind, two men were seated bending down over a small shell or gourd placed on a fire of sticks.

In ordinary circumstances there would have been nothing strange in this, for the sight of peripatetic hawkers and tinkers along the cliffs was not unusual.

But these men did not belong to that class. They were tall and spare; they were clad in dingy robes; on their heads were turbans of the same sad color. They were dark of feature, with thin faces and ragged beards. In appearance they were singularly alike; indeed, they might have been twin brothers some time past the prime of life.

From the shell on the ground a thick vapor was rising. The smell of it floated on the air to Geoffrey's nostrils. He reeled back almost sick and faint with the perfume and the discovery he had made. For that infernal stuff had exactly the same smell as the pungent drug which had come so near to destroying the life of Rupert Ravenspur only a few hours before.

Here was something to set the blood tingling in the veins and the pulses leaping with a mad excitement. From over the top of the gorse Geoffrey watched with all his eyes. He saw the smoke gradually die away; he saw a small mass taken from the gourd and carefully stowed away in a metal box. Then the fire was kicked out and all traces of it were obliterated.

Geoffrey crept back again to Vera, trembling from head to foot. He had made up his mind what to do. He would say nothing of this strange discovery to Vera; he would keep it for Ralph Ravenspur's ears alone. Ralph had been in foreign parts and might understand the enigma.

Meanwhile it became necessary to get out of the Asiatics' way. It was not prudent for them to know that a Ravenspur was so close. Vera looked into Geoffrey's face, wondering.

"How pale you are!" she said. "And how long you have been!"

"Come and let us walk," said Geoffrey. "I – I twisted my ankle on a stone and it gave me a twinge or two. It's all right now. Shall we see if we can get as far as Sprawl Point and back before luncheon?"

Vera rose to the challenge. She rather prided herself on her powers as a walker. The exercise caused her to glow and tingle, and all the way it never occurred to her how silent and abstracted Geoffrey had become.

CHAPTER VI

ABELL CARRIES OUT HIS ERRAND

When Ralph Ravenspur reached the basement, his whole aspect had changed. For the next day or two he brooded about the house, mainly with his own thoughts for company. He was ubiquitous. His silent, cat-like tread carried him noiselessly everywhere. He seemed to be looking for something with those sightless eyes of his; those long fingers were crooked as if about the throat of the great mystery.

He came into the library where Rupert Ravenspur and Marion were talking earnestly. He dropped in upon them as if he had fallen from the clouds. Marion started and laughed.

"I declare you frighten me," she said. "You are like a shadow – the shadow of one's conscience."

"There can be no shadow on yours," Ralph replied. "You are too pure and good for that. Never, never will you have cause to fear me."

"All the same, I wish you were less like a cat," Ravenspur exclaimed petulantly, as Marion walked smilingly away. "Anybody would imagine that you were part of the family mystery. Ralph, do you know anything?"

"I am blind," Ralph replied doggedly. "Of what use is a blind man?"

"I don't know; they say that when one sense is lost the others are sharpened. And you came home so mysteriously, you arrived at a critical moment for me, you were at my door at the time when help was sorely needed. Again, when you burst my door open you did the only thing that could have saved me."

"Common sense, sir. You were stifling and I gave you air."

Ravenspur shook his head. He was by no means satisfied.

"It was the common sense that is based upon practical experience. And you prowl about in dark corners; you wander about the house in the dead of the night. You hint at a strange past, but as to that past you are dumb. For Heaven's sake, if you know anything tell me. The suspense is maddening."

"I know nothing and I am blind," Ralph repeated. "As to my past, that is between me and my Maker. I dare not speak of it. Let me go my own way and do not interfere with me. And whatever you do or say, tell nobody – nobody, mind – that you suspect me of knowledge of the family trouble."

Ralph turned away abruptly and refused to say more. He passed from the castle across the park slowly, but with the confidence of a man who is assured of every step. The recollection of his boyhood's days stood him in good stead. He could not see, but he knew where he was and even the grim cliffs held no terrors for him.

He came at length to a certain spot where he paused. It was here years ago that he had scaled the cliffs at the peril of his neck and found the raven's nest. He caught the perfume of the heather and the crushed fragrance of the wild thyme, but their scents were as nothing to his nostrils.

For he had caught another scent that had brought him up all standing with his head in the air. The odor was almost exhausted; there was merely a faint suspicion of it, but at the same time it spoke to Ralph as plainly as words.

He was standing near the hollow where Geoffrey had been two days ago. In his mind's eye Ralph could see into this hollow. Years before he had been used to lie there winter evenings when the brent and ducks were coming in from the sea. He scrambled down, sure-footed as a goat.

Then he proceeded to grope upon the grass with those long restless fingers. He picked up a charred stick or two, smelt it, and shook his head. Presently his hand closed upon the burnt fragments of a gourd. As Ralph raised this to his nostrils his eyes gleamed.

"I was certain of it," he muttered. "Two of the Bonzes have been here, and they have been making the pi. If I could only see!"

As yet he had not heard of Geoffrey's singular discovery. There had been no favorable opportunity of disclosing the secret.

Ralph retraced his steps moodily. For the present he was helpless. He had come across the clue to the enigma, but only he knew of the tremendous difficulties and dangers to be encountered before the heart of the mystery could be revealed. He felt cast down and discouraged. There was bitterness in his heart for those who had deprived him of his precious sight.

"Oh, if I could only see!" he cried. "A week or month to look from one eye into another, to strip off the mask and lay the black soul bare. And yet if the one only guessed what I know, my life would not be worth an hour's purchase! And if those people at the castle only knew that the powers of hell – living, raging hell – were arrayed against them! But they would not believe."

An impotent sigh escaped the speaker. Just for the moment his resolution had failed him. It was some time before he became conscious of the fact that some one was dogging his footsteps.

"Do you want to see me?" he demanded.

There was no reply for a moment. Abell came up cautiously. He looked around him, but so far as he could see he and Ravenspur were alone. As he caught sight of the latter's face he had no ground for further doubt.

"I did want to see you and see you alone, sir," Abell replied. "I believe I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Ralph Ravenspur?"

"The same, sir," Ralph said coldly. "You are a stranger to me."

"A stranger who brings a message from a friend. I was to see you alone and for two days I have been waiting for this opportunity. My employer asks me to deliver this box into your hands."

At the same time Abell passed the little brass case into Ralph's hand. As his fingers closed upon it a great light swept over his face; a hoarse shout came from lips that turned from red to blue, and then to white and red again. So Tchigorsky had behaved when he discovered that this man still lived.

"Who gave you this, and what is your message?" Ravenspur panted.

"The message," said Abell, "was merely this. I was to give you the box and say: 'Tchigorsky – Danger,' and walk away, unless you detained me."

"Then my friend Tchigorsky is alive?"

"Yes, sir; it is my privilege to be his private secretary."

"A wonderful man," Ralph cried; "perhaps the most wonderful man in Europe. And to think that he is alive! If an angel had come down from heaven and asked me to crave a boon, I should have asked to have Tchigorsky in the flesh before me. You have given me new heart of grace; you are like water in a dry land. This is the happiest day I have known since –"

The speaker paused and mumbled something incoherent. But the stolid expression had gone from his scarred face, and a strange, triumphant happiness reigned in its stead. He seemed years younger, his step had grown more elastic; there was a fresh, broad ring in his voice.

"Tchigorsky will desire to see me," he said. "Indeed, it is absolutely essential that we should meet and that without delay. A time of danger lies before us – danger that the mere mortal does not dream of. Take this to Tchigorsky and be careful of it."

He drew from a chain inside his vest a small case, almost identical to the one that Abell had just handed to him, save that it was silver, while the other was brass. On it were the same queer signs and symbols.

"That will convince my friend that the puzzle is intact," he continued. "We hold the key to the enigma – nay, the key to the past and future. But all this is so much Greek to you. I will come and see my friend on Friday; but not in the guise of Ralph Ravenspur."

"What am I to understand by that, sir?" Abell asked.

"It matters nothing what you understand," Ralph cried. "Tchigorsky will know. Tell him 7:15 at Euston on Friday, not in the guise of Ravenspur or Tchigorsky. He will read between the lines. Go and be seen with me no more."

Ralph strode off with his head in the air. His blood was singing in his ears; his pulse was leaping with a new life.

"At last," he murmured; "after all these years for myself and my kin! At last!"

CHAPTER VII

MORE LIGHT

There was a curious, eager flush on Ralph Ravenspur's face. He rose from his seat and paced the room restlessly. Those long fingers were incessantly clutching at something vague and unseen. And, at the same time, he was following the story that Geoffrey had to tell with the deepest attention.

"What does it mean, uncle?" the young man asked at length.

"I cannot tell you," Ralph replied. His tones were hard and cold. "There are certain things no mortal can understand unless – ; but I must not go into that. It may be that you have touched the fringe of the mystery – "

"I am certain that we are on the verge of a discovery!" Geoffrey cried eagerly. "I am sure that stuff those strangers were making was the same as the drug or whatever it was that came so near to making an end of my grandfather. If I knew what to do!"

"Nothing – do nothing, as you hope for the future!"

The words came hissing from Ralph's lips. He felt his way across to Geoffrey and laid a grip on his arm that seemed to cut like a knife.

"Forget it!" he whispered. "Fight down the recollection of the whole thing; do nothing based upon your discovery. I cannot say more, but I am going to give you advice worth much gold. Promise me that you will forget this matter; that you will not mention it to a soul. Promise!"

Geoffrey promised, somewhat puzzled and dazed. Did Ralph know everything, or was he as ignorant as the rest?

"I will do what you like," said Geoffrey. "But it is very hard. Can't you tell me a little more? I am brave and strong."

"Courage and strength have nothing to do with it. A nation could do nothing in this case. I am going to London to-day."

"You are going to London alone?"

"Why not? I came here from the other side of the world alone. I have to see a doctor about my eyes. No, there is no hope that I can ever recover my sight again; but it is possible to allay the pain they give me."

Ralph departed. A dogcart deposited him at Biston Junction, and then the servant saw him safely into the London train. But presently Ralph alighted and a porter guided him to a cab. A little later and the blind man was knocking at the door of a cottage in the poorer portion of the town.

A short, stocky man, with a seafaring air, opened the door.

"Is it you, Elphick?" Ralph asked.

The short man with the resolute face and keen, gray eyes exclaimed with pleasure:

"So you've got back at last, sir. Come in, sir. I am alone here as you know. I knew you'd want me before long."

Ralph Ravenspur felt his way to a chair. James Elphick stood watching him with something more than pleasure in his eyes.

"We have no time to spare," Ralph exclaimed. "We must be in London to-night, James. I am going up to see Dr. Tchigorsky."

"Dr. Tchigorsky!" Elphick exclaimed. "Didn't I always say as how he'd get through? The man who'd get the best of him ain't born yet. But it means danger, sir. Nothing we ever carried out with the doctor was anything else."

"Danger you do not dream of," Ralph said impressively. "But I cannot discuss this with you, James. You are coming with me to London. Get the disguise out and let me see if your hand still retains its cunning."

Apparently it had, for an hour later there walked from the cottage toward the station an elderly, stout man, with white hair and beard and whiskers. His eyes were guarded by tinted glasses; the complexion of the face was singularly clear and ruddy. All trace of those cruel criss-cross lines had gone. Wherever Elphick had learned his art, he had not failed to learn it thoroughly.

"It's perfect; though I say it as shouldn't," he remarked. "It's no use, sir; you can't get on without me. If I'd gone with you to Lassa, all that horrible torture business would never have happened."

Ralph Ravenspur smiled cautiously. The stiff dressing on his face made a smile difficult in any case.

"At all events, I shall want you now," he said.

It was nearly seven when the express tram reached Euston. Ralph stood on the great bustling, echoing, platform as if waiting for something. An exclamation from Elphick attracted his attention.

"There's the doctor as large as life!" he said.

"Tchigorsky!" Ralph cried. "Surely not in his natural guise. Oh, this is reckless folly! Does he court defeat at the outset of our enterprise?"

Tchigorsky bustled up. For some reason or other he chose to appear in his natural guise. Not till they were in the cab did Ravenspur venture to expostulate.

"Much learning has made you mad," he said bitterly.

"Not a bit of it," the Russian responded. "Unfortunately for me the priests of Lassa have discovered that I am deeply versed in their secrets. Not that they believe for a moment that Tchigorsky and the Russian who walked the valley of the Red Death are one and the same. They deem me to be the recipient of that unhappy man's early discoveries. But your identity remains a secret. The cleverest eyes in the world could never penetrate your disguise."

"It comforts me to hear that," Ralph replied. "Everything depends upon my identity being concealed. Once it is discovered, every Ravenspur is doomed. But I cannot understand why you escape recognition at the hands of the foe."

A bitter smile came over Tchigorsky's face.

"Can you not?" he said. "If you had your eyes you would understand. Man, I have been actually in the company of those who flung me into the valley of the Red Death and they have not known me. After that I stood in the presence of my own mother, and she asked who I was."

"The marks on my face? Well, there are plenty of explorers who have been victims to the wire helmet and have never dreamt of entering Lassa. I am a broken, decrepit wreck, I who was once so proud of my inches. The horrors of that one day have changed me beyond recognition. But you know."

Ralph shuddered from head to foot. A cold moisture stood on his forehead.

"Don't," he whispered. "Don't speak of it. When the recollection comes over me I have to hold on to my senses as a shipwrecked sailor clings to a plank. Never mind the past – the future has peril and danger enough. You know why I am here?"

"To save your house from the curse upon it. To bring the East and West together, and tell of the vilest conspiracy the world has ever seen. Do you know who the guilty creature is, whose hand is actually striking the blow?"

"I think so; in fact I am sure of it. But who would believe my accusation?"

"Who, indeed! But we shall be in a position to prove our case, now that the secrets of the prison-house lie before us. We have three to fear."

"Yes, yes," said Ralph. "The two Bonzes – who have actually been seen near Ravenspur – and the Princess Zara. Could she recognize me?"

Ralph asked the question in almost passionate entreaty.

"I am certain she could not," Tchigorsky replied. "Come, victory shall be ours yet. Here we are at my house at last. By the way, you must have a name. You shall be my cousin Nicholas Tchigorsky, a clever savant, who, by reason of a deplorable accident, has become both blind and dumb. Allons."

CHAPTER VIII

A MASTER OF FENCE

Lady Mallowbloom's reception rooms were more than usually crowded. And every other man or woman in the glittering salon was a celebrity. There was a strong sprinkling of the aristocracy to leaven the lump; here and there the flash of red cloth and gold could be seen.

In his quiet, masterly style Tchigorsky pushed his way up the stairs. Ralph Ravenspur followed, his hand upon the Russian's arm. He could feel the swish of satin draperies go by him; he caught the perfume on the warm air.

"Why do you drag me here?" he grumbled. "I can see nothing; it only bewilders me. I should have been far happier in your study."

"You mope too much," Tchigorsky said gaily. "To mingle with one's fellows is good at times. I know so many people who are here to-night."

"And I know nobody; add to which circumstances compel me to be dumb. Place me in some secluded spot with my back to the wall, and then enjoy yourself for an hour. I dare say I shall manage to kill the time."

There were many celebrities in the brilliantly-lighted room, and Tchigorsky indicated a few. A popular lady novelist passed on the arm of a poet on her way to the buffet.

"A wonderful woman," the fair authoress was saying. "Eastern and full of mystery, you know. Did you notice the eyes of the Princess?"

"Who could fail to?" was the reply. "They say that she is quite five and forty, and yet she would easily pass for eighteen, but for her knowledge of the world. Your Eastern Princess is one of the most fascinating women I have even seen."

Others passed, and had the same theme. Ralph stirred to a faint curiosity.

"Who is the new marvel?" he asked.

"I don't know," Tchigorsky admitted. "The last new lion, I suppose. Some pretty Begum or the wife of some Oriental whose dark eyes appear to have fired society. By the crowd of people coming this way I presume the dusky beauty is among them. If so, she has an excellent knowledge of English."

A clear, sweet voice arose. At the first sound of it, Ralph jumped to his feet and clutched at his throat as if something choked him. He shook with a great agitation; a nameless fear had him in a close grip.

"Do you recognize the voice?" Ralph gasped.

The Russian was not unmoved. But his agitation was quickly suppressed. He forced Ralph down in his seat again.

"You will have to behave better than that if you are to be a trusty ally of mine," he said. "Come, that is better! Sit still; she is coming this way."

"I'm all right now," Ralph replied. "The shock of finding myself in the presence of Princess Zara was overpowering. Have no fear for me."

A tall woman, magnificently dressed, was making her way towards Tchigorsky. Her face was the hue of old ivory, and as fine; her great lustrous eyes gleamed brightly; a mass of hair was piled high on a daintily poised head. The woman might have been extremely young so far as the touch of time was concerned, but the easy self-possession told another tale.

The red lips tightened for an instant, a strange gleam came into the dark magnetic eyes as they fell upon Tchigorsky. Then the Indian Princess advanced with a smile, and held out her hand to the Russian.

"So you are still here!" she said.

There was the suggestion of a challenge in her tones. Her eyes met those of Tchigorsky as the eyes of two swordsmen might meet. There was a tigerish playfulness underlying the words, a call-note of significant warning.

"I still take the liberty of existing," said Tchigorsky.

"You are a brave man, doctor. Your friend here?"

"Is my cousin Nicholas Tchigorsky? The poor fellow is blind and dumb, as the result of a terrible accident. Best not to notice him."

The Princess shrugged her beautiful shoulders as she dropped gracefully into a seat.

"I heard you were in London," she said, "and something told me that we should meet sooner or later. You are still interested in occult matters?"

Again Ralph detected the note of warning in the speech. He could see nothing of the expression on that perfect face; but he could judge it fairly well.

"I am more interested in occult matters than ever," Tchigorsky said gravely, "especially in certain discoveries placed in my hands by a traveler in Tibet."

"Ah, that was your fellow-countryman. He died, you know!"

"He was murdered in the vilest manner. But before the end, he managed to convey important information to me."

"Useless information unless you had the key."

"There was one traveler who found the key, you remember?"

"True, doctor. He also, I fancy, met with an accident that, unfortunately, resulted in his death."

Ralph shuddered slightly. Princess Zara's tones were hard as steel. If she had spoken openly and callously of this man being murdered, she could not have expressed the same thing more plainly. A beautiful woman, a fascinating one; but a woman with no heart and no feeling where her hatreds were concerned.

"It is just possible I have the key," said Tchigorsky.

The eyes of the Princess blazed for a moment. Then she smiled.

"Dare you use it?" she asked. "If you dare, then all the secrets of heaven and hell are yours. For four thousand years the priests of the temple at Lassa and the heads of my family have solved the future. You know what we can do. We are all powerful for evil. We can strike down our foes by means unknown to your boasted Western science. They are all the same to us, proud potentate, ex-meddling doctor."

There was a menace in the last words. Tchigorsky smiled:

"The meddling doctor has already had personal experience," he said. "I carry the marks of my suffering to the grave. I remember how your peasants treated me and this does not tend to relax my efforts."

"And yet you might die at any moment. If you persist in your studies you will have to die. The eyes of Western men must not look upon the secrets of the priests of Lassa and live. Be warned, Dr. Tchigorsky, be warned in time. You are brave and clever, and as such command respect. If you know everything and proclaim it to the world – "

"Civilization will come as one man, and no stone in Lassa shall stand on another. Your priests will be butchered like wild beasts; an infernal plague spot will be wiped off the face of the outraged earth!"

The Princess caught her breath swiftly. Just for one moment there was murder in her eyes. She held her fan as if it were a dagger ready for the Russian's heart.

"Why should you do this thing?" she asked.

"Because your knowledge is diabolical," Tchigorsky replied. "In the first place, all who are in the secret can commit murder with impunity. As the Anglo-Saxon pushes on to the four corners of the earth that knowledge must become public property. I am going to stop that if I can."

"And if you die in the meantime? You are bold to rashness. And yet there are many things that you do not know."

"The longer I live, the more glaring my ignorance becomes. I do not know whence you derive your perfect mastery of the English tongue. But I do know that I am going to see this business through."

"Man proposes, but the arm of the priests is long."

"Ah, I understand. I may die to-night. I should not mind. Still, let us argue the matter out. Say that I have already solved the problem. I write a detailed account of the whole weird business. I write twenty detailed statements; I enclose the key in each. These statements I address to a score of the leading savants in Europe.

"Then I place them in, say, a safe deposit until my death. I write to each of those wise men a letter with an enclosure not to be opened till I die. That enclosure contains a key to my safe, and presently in that safe all those savants find a packet addressed to themselves. In a week all Europe would ring with my wonderful discoveries. Think of the outcry, the wrath, the indignation!"

The Princess smiled. She could appreciate a stratagem like this. With dull, stolid and averted face, Ralph Ravenspur listened and wondered. He heard the laugh that came from the lips of the Princess; he detected the vexation underlying it. Tchigorsky was a foeman worthy of her steel.

"That you propose to do?" she asked.

"A question you will pardon me for not answering," said Tchigorsky. "You have made your move and I have made mine. Whether I am going to do the thing, or whether I have done so, remains to be seen. Whether you dare risk my death now is a matter for you to decide. Check to your king."

Again the Princess smiled. She looked searchingly into Tchigorsky's face, as if she would fain read his very soul. But she saw nothing there but the dull eyes of a man who keeps his feelings behind a mask. Then, with a flirt of her fan and a more or less mocking curtsy, she turned to go.

"You are a fine antagonist," she said; "but I do not admit yet that you are a check to my king. I shall find a way. Good-night!"

She turned and plunged into the glittering crowd, and was seen no more. A strange fit of trembling came over Ravenspur as Tchigorsky led him out.

"That woman stifles me," he said. "If she had only guessed who had been seated so near to her! Tchigorsky, you played your cards well."

Tchigorsky smiled.

"I was glad of that opportunity," he said. "She meant to have me murdered; but she will hesitate for a time. We have one great advantage – we know what we have to face and she does not. The men are on the board, the cards are on the table. It is you and I against Princess Zara and the two priests of the temple of Lassa. And we play for the lives of a good and innocent family."

"We do," Ralph said grimly. "But why – why does this fascinating Asiatic come all those miles to destroy one by one a race that she can scarcely have heard of? Why does she do it, Tchigorsky?"

"You have not guessed who the Princess is, then?"

Tchigorsky bent down and whispered three words in Ralph's ear. And not until Brant Street was reached had Ralph come back from his amazement to the land of speech.

CHAPTER IX

APRIL DAYS

The terror never lifted now from the old house. There were days and weeks when nothing happened, but the garrison did not permit itself to believe that the unseen enemy had abandoned the unequal contest.

The old people were prepared for the end which they believed to be inevitable. A settled melancholy was upon them, and it was only when they were together that anything like a sense of security prevailed. For the moment they were safe – there was always safety in numbers.

But when they parted for the night they parted as comrades on the eve of a bloody battle. They might meet again, but the chances were strong against it. For themselves they cared nothing; for the younger people, everything.

It was fortunate that the fine constitutions and strong nerves of Geoffrey and Vera and Marion kept them going. A really imaginative man or woman would have been driven mad by the awful suspense. But Geoffrey was bright and sunny; he always felt that the truth would come to light some day. And his buoyant, sanguine nature reacted on the others.

Nearly a month had elapsed since the weird attempt on the life of Rupert Ravenspur; four weeks since Geoffrey's strange experience on the cliffs; and nothing had happened. The family had lapsed once more into their ordinary mode of living; blind Ralph was back again, feeling his way about the castle as usual, silent, moody, in the habit of gliding in upon people as a snake comes through the grass.

Ralph came into breakfast, creeping to his chair without touching anything, dropping into it as if he had fallen from the clouds. Marion, next to him, shuddered. They were quite good friends, these two, but Marion was slightly afraid of her uncle. His secret ways repelled her; he had a way of talking with his sightless eyes upturned; he seemed to understand the unspoken thoughts of others.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

Marion laughed. None of the others had come down yet.

"What should be the matter?" she replied.

"Well, you shuddered. You should be sorry for me, my dear. Some of these days I mean to tell you the story of my life. Oh, yes, it will be a story – what a story! And you will never forget it as long as you live."

There was something uncanny in the words – a veiled threat, the suggestion of one who had waited for a full revenge, with the knowledge that the time would come. Yet the scarred face was without expression; the eyes were vacant.

"Won't you tell me now?" Marion asked softly. "I am so sorry for you?"

The sweet, thrilling sympathy would have moved a stone, but it had no effect upon Ralph. He merely caressed Marion's slim fingers and smiled. It was significant of his extraordinary power that he found Marion's hand without feeling for it. He was given to touch those slim fingers. And yet he never allowed Marion to kiss him.

"All in good time," he said; "but not yet, not yet."

Before Marion could reply, Mrs. Gordon Ravenspur came into the room. Marion seemed to divine more than see that something had happened. She jumped to her feet and crossed the room.

"Dear aunt," she said quickly. "What is it?"

"Vera," Mrs. Gordon replied. "She called me into her room just now saying she was feeling far from well. I had hardly got into her room before she fainted. I have never known Vera do such a thing before."

Ralph was sitting and drumming his fingers on the table as if the subject had not the slightest interest for him. But, with the swiftness of lightning, a strange, hard, cunning expression flashed

across his face and was gone. When Marion turned to him he had vanished also. It almost seemed as if he had the gift of fernseed.

"A mere passing weakness," Marion said soothingly.

"I should like to think so," Mrs. Gordon replied. "In normal circumstances I should think so. But not now; not now, Marion."

Marion sighed deeply. There were times when even she was oppressed.

"I'll go and see Vera," she said. "I am sure there is no cause for alarm."

Marion slipped rapidly away up the stone stairs and along the echoing corridor toward Vera's room. She was smiling now, and she kissed her hand to the dead and gone Ravenspurs frowning upon her from the walls. Then she burst gaily into Vera's room.

"My dear child," she cried, "you really must not alarm us by –"

She paused suddenly. Vera, fully dressed, was seated in a chair, whilst Ralph was by her side. He seemed more alive than usual; he had been saying something to Vera that had brought the color to her face. As Marion entered he grew grave and self-contained; like a snail retreating into its shell, Marion thought. He sat down and tattooed with his fingers on the dressing-table.

"I had no idea you had company," Marion smiled.

"I intruded," Ralph said gravely. There was a sardonic inflection in his voice. "Yet I flatter myself that Vera is the better for my attention."

Marion looked swiftly from one to the other. She was puzzled. Almost flawless as she was, she had her minor weaknesses, or she had been less charming than he was, and she hated to be puzzled. Vera was no longer pale and all signs of languor had departed, yet she looked confused and there was the trace of a blush on her cheeks.

"Sometimes I fancy that Uncle Ralph is laughing at us all," she said, with a laugh that was not altogether natural. "But I am all right now, dear Marion. Save for a racking headache, I am myself again."

Marion, solicitous for others always, flew for her smelling salts. In three strides Ralph was across the floor, and had closed the door behind her. His manner had instantly changed; he was full of energy and action.

"Take this," he whispered. "Take it and the cure will be complete. Crush it up between your teeth and drink a glass of water afterwards."

He forced a small white pellet between Vera's teeth; he heard her teeth crushing it. With his peculiar gift for finding things, he crossed over to the washstand and returned with a glass of water.

"You are better?" he asked, as Vera gulped the water down.

"Oh, yes, uncle; are you a wizard or what? My headache seems to have lifted from me as one takes off a hat. The stuff you gave me –"

"Say no more about it; think no more about it. But whenever the same feeling comes over you again let me know at once. And you are not to mention this to anybody."

"But my mother and Geoffrey and –"

"Ah, you love Geoffrey? But there is no need to ask you the question. You want to rid the house of its nameless terror; you want to be free, to marry Geoffrey and be happy. Dear child, all these things will come if you listen to me. I swear it. And now will you promise me that you will say nothing of this to a soul?"

"Dear uncle, I promise."

Ralph had grown cold and moody again. When Marion returned with her salts he slipped out of the room as callously as if he were not in the least interested. And while many anxious eyes followed Vera at breakfast time, Ralph alone was indifferent, brutally indifferent, Marion thought.

"Are you thinking of the same thing that we are?" she asked.

"No," Ralph said shortly. "I was thinking what poor bacon this is."

CHAPTER X

A LITTLE SUNSHINE

After luncheon, Geoffrey was leaning over the stone balustrade of the terrace waiting for Vera. Beyond a slight restlessness and extra brilliancy of the eye she was better. She had proposed a ramble along the cliffs and Geoffrey had assented eagerly.

His anxiety was fading away like the ashes of his cigarette. At first he had been inclined to imagine that Vera's indisposition had been a move on the part of the unseen foe. But he put this idea from him as illogical. The enemy was not in the habit of using the gloved hand like this. He struck down fiercely and remorselessly.

"No," Geoffrey murmured aloud; "Vera could not have been spared!"

A gentle hand was laid upon his arm. Marion stood beside him. They were alone at that angle of the terrace and unseen from the house.

"You are right," said Marion. "Don't worry about that any more."

Geoffrey nodded approvingly. He slipped his arm round Marion's waist and kissed her in a brotherly fashion. Marion inclined toward him with half-closed eyes and a brightened color. Her limbs trembled; the pressure of her lips was warm and sweet.

"Dear little sister," Geoffrey murmured. "What should we do without you?"

Marion drew herself away abruptly. She rested her clasped hands over the stone balcony so that Geoffrey should not see their unsteadiness; her flushed face was half averted. It was a taking, a perfect picture.

"What would Vera say?" she asked.

"As if Vera would mind! Don't we all love you the same? And how many times has Vera seen me kiss you? If there were no Vera, little sister, then you may be sure that I should have kissed you in a different way!"

Marion laughed at the easy impertinence. That Geoffrey had no real love or passion for anybody but Vera she knew perfectly well. She laughed again, but there was nothing spontaneous in it; indeed, anybody but a youthful egotist in love could have detected a certain jarring note of pain.

"Here is Vera," said Geoffrey. "Let us ask her."

They put it to her merrily. They might have been in a world beyond all sorrow or suffering. The music of their fresh young voices floated in the air. Then Marion bent over the balustrade and watched the lovers out of sight. Her face grew hard; a veil of heavy years seemed to have fallen over it.

"If he only knew!" she said; "if he only knew! Why are clever people often so foolish? And why do they commit follies with their eyes wide open? Well, it doesn't matter, for you will never know, dear Geoffrey, how passionately and devotedly I love you. And you never, never know when temptation and inclination and opportunity go together. And I don't believe that anybody could resist temptation if he or she were certain not to be found out!"

"I am perfectly sure they wouldn't."

Marion turned with a stifled cry on her lips. Ralph Ravenspur was behind her. The expression on his face was wooden and emotionless.

"I hope you have not been listening to me," she said reproachfully.

"I have been watching you, or rather feeling your presence for some time." Ralph admitted. "I have been here since those young people went away. But you said nothing; at least nothing I heard until that bit of worldly wisdom dropped from your lips."

"It was an unworthy thought, Uncle Ralph."

"It might be unworthy of you, my dear, but I fancy it is true. Even the very best of people give way to temptation. Put it away from you; don't dwell upon your temptation, or it may get you into trouble."

"My temptation! Do you mean to say you know what it is?"

"I do," said Ralph. "You are deeply in love with your cousin Geoffrey. There is wild blood in your veins, and that blood will out unless you keep your feelings well under control. Ah, you may stare and look dismayed, which I am sure you are doing although I cannot see you. Yes, there is always the temptation to pray that the family foe might remove Vera from your path."

A piteous cry came from Marion's lips. Who was this man who knew so much and could probe her secret soul? Yet he was blind; he could not see. Was it possible that some such horrible thoughts had crossed Marion's mind? Atrocious thoughts will come to the best of us unasked for, unsought.

"Oh, you are cruel!" she said.

"Perhaps I am," Ralph admitted. "You see, I live in a dark world of my own and I have small belief in the virtues of my fellow-creatures. But you are an angel and I have amused myself by searing your wings."

"Is that because you think my secret is a shameful one?"

"Not in the least. Who can help the wayward driftings of a woman's heart? And, anyway, your secret is safe with me."

He felt for Marion's fingers and put them to his lips. Before the girl could reply he had drifted away, apparently feeling his way into space. And for a long time Marion stood there gazing out to sea.

Meanwhile the lovers had forgotten everything but the beauty of the day, and that the world was for themselves alone. The sun shone for them, for them the blue sea thundered in white battalions against the cliffs; for them the lark poured out its song at the gate of heaven, and the heather bloomed on moor and headland.

They strolled along until they came to a favored spot where the gorse flowered in yellow fires, and the crushed wild thyme was pungent under their feet. Here Geoffrey threw himself on the turf and Vera reclined by his side.

He could touch her hands and toy with the little ripples of her hair. To watch the play of those pretty features and look back the love he saw in those great starry eyes was a thing without alloy.

"Ah, me, if we could always be like this!" Vera said.

"You and I would be happy in any circumstances," said Geoffrey thoughtfully. "Only I should like to see something of the world."

"What, go away and leave me all alone, dearest?"

Geoffrey smiled at this innocent coquetry. He touched the smooth satin cheek caressingly. Vera only wanted him to disclaim any such intention and he knew it, too. There was no deception about the matter, but they were none the less happy for that.

"Of course not," Geoffrey declared. "I should take you with me wherever I went. If we could only get the bar removed I should like to travel. I should like to see men and cities, and measure my strength with my fellows. I should like to go into Parliament. Ah, if we could only get the bar removed!"

"If we only could," Vera sighed. "But I can't imagine that they will touch us. We are so young and so innocent of wrong-doing. And yet this morning –"

Vera paused, half afraid of betraying Ralph Ravenspur's confidence.

"Only this morning you were a bit afraid. Confess it."

"I was, Geoff. I felt strange when I awoke in the night. I felt cold and like death when I awoke to-day, and then I fainted."

"But you are all right now, darling," Geoff said anxiously.

"Yes, dear, I never felt better. Still, it was a strange thing altogether. I was well when I went to bed, but in the night I had a curious dream. It seemed to me that I was lying half asleep with a

singular pricking sensation of my lips and face. And then an angel came down and laid some white powder on my pillow, a white powder that looked like a mixture of salt and powdered glass. Almost immediately the pain ceased and I slept again. Then I awoke finally and had that fainting fit. Don't you think it was a queer thing?"

"Yes, but what had the dream and the powder to do with it, little girl?"

"I was coming to that, Geoff. After I got better I remembered my dream and looked at the pillow. You smile, thinking that only a woman would do that. Sure enough there was some trace of gritty powder there, and I collected it in a tissue paper. Directly I got it to the light half of it melted; it seemed to dissolve in light like water. And here it is."

Vera produced a tiny packet from her pocket and opened it. There were several grains of some sharp powder there which, as Geoffrey held them in his hand, dissolved to nothingness. His face was very pale.

"Darling, this is a dreadful thing," he murmured. "I fancy – "

He paused, fearful of alarming Vera. He saw the hand of fate in this; he saw the sword that was hanging over that beloved young life.

A passion of anger and despair filled him, but for Vera's sake he checked the feeling. And it seemed to him as if he had passed in a minute down a decade of years; as if in that brief space he had left his boyhood behind and become a man.

"This must be looked into," he said sternly. "Every precaution – "

"Has been taken," Vera said quietly. "We have a protector among us, dearest. One who is worth all the precautions put together. Do not fear for me and do not ask me any questions, because I must not answer them. But I am safe."

Geoffrey nodded. The cloud slowly lifted from his forehead. Vera was speaking of her uncle Ralph and there was no reason to ask any questions. Was it possible, Geoffrey wondered, that Ralph Ravenspur had gone to the heart of the mystery, that it was wrapped up in his life, and that he had come home to solve it?

But of this he said nothing. He resolved to render every assistance. This vile thing was the work of earthly hands and earthly ingenuity could solve it. Never was there cipher invented that was incapable of solution.

Geoffrey drew Vera to his side and kissed her passionately. For a little time she lay in his arms in absolute content. Her smiling eyes were clear, her features placid. In any case she feared no unseen danger. There must be some great sheltering power behind her, or she had never looked so sweet and placid as that.

"I could not do without you, darling," Geoffrey said.

"And you are not going to do without me," Vera smiled. "There is much yet to be done, but it is going to be accomplished, dearest. Something tells me that the hour of our freedom is at hand. And something also tells me, Geoff, that you are going to have a great deal to do with it."

They came back at length up the slope leading to the castle. And there Ralph came upon them in his own noiseless, mysterious fashion. He clung to them until Vera had entered the house and then led Geoffrey to the terrace.

"There is nobody within earshot of us?" he demanded.

Geoffrey assured him that there was not. He was impressed with the earnestness of his uncle's manner. He had never seen him so moved before.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"Much," was the whispered reply. "If you are bold and resolute."

"I am, I am. I would lay down my life as the martyrs of old did to solve the mystery."

"Ah," Ralph said, in a dry, croaking whisper. "I felt sure I could trust you. There is a great danger and it is near. In that danger I want a pair of eyes. Lend me yours."

"Dear uncle, I will do anything you please."

"Good. I like the ring in your voice. At half-past eleven to-night I will come to your room. There I will confide in you. Till then, absolute silence."

CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER STROKE IN THE DARKNESS

Contrary to the usual custom, there was almost a marked cheerfulness at Ravenspur the same evening. The dread seemed to have lifted slightly, though nobody could say why, even if they cared to analyze, which they certainly did not. And all this because it had seemed to the doomed race that Vera was marked down for destruction, and that the tragedy, the pitiful tragedy, had been averted.

It is hardly possible to imagine a state of mind like this. And Vera half divined the reason for this gentle gaiety. She might have told them differently had she chosen to do so, but for many reasons she refrained.

She did not even tell her mother. Why draw the veil aside when even a few hours' peace stood between them and the terror which sooner or later must sap the reason of every one there? Besides, Uncle Ralph had pledged her to the utmost secrecy.

For once Rupert Ravenspur had abandoned his stony air. He sat at the head of the long table in the dining-room, where the lamplight streamed upon fruit and flowers and crystal, upon priceless china, and silver from the finest workshops in the world.

Grinling Gibbons and Inigo Jones had toiled in that dining-hall as a labor of love; a famous master had painted the loves of the angels on the roof. Between the oak panels were paintings by Van Dyck, Cuyp and the rest of them. And over the floor servants in livery moved swiftly. Rupert Ravenspur might have been a monarch entertaining some of his favored subjects.

It was almost impossible to believe that a great sorrow could be brooding here. There was everything that the heart of the most luxurious could demand. Strangers might have looked on and envied. But the stately old man who called all this his own would gladly have changed lots with the humblest hind on the estate.

Now and then Rupert came out of his reverie and smiled. But his tenderest smile and his warmest word were for Vera, who he had placed on his right hand. Now and again he stroked her hair or touched her fingers gently. Marion watched the scene with a tender smile on her lips.

Only Ralph Ravenspur was silent. He sat with his sightless eyes fixed on space; he seemed to be listening intently, listening to something far away that could be heard by his ears alone. Geoffrey touched him.

"A penny for your thoughts, uncle," he said.

"They are worth nothing," Ralph replied. "And if I sold them to you for a penny you would give all Ravenspur Castle and your coming fortune to be rid of them."

He croaked this out in a fierce whisper. There was a ring of pain in his voice, that pain which is the suffering of the soul rather than the body. Yet he did not relax his rigid listening attitude. He might have been waiting for the unseen foe.

The conversation proceeded fitfully, sometimes almost lively, anon lapsing into silence. It was hard for these people to speak. They had no interests outside the castle; they found it impossible to follow social or political life. Daily papers arrived, but it was seldom that they were looked into.

The dinner came to an end at length, and then the family circle drew round the fire. Ravenspur was one of those big cold places where fires are always needed. Mrs. Gordon rose and walked to the door. Her husband's eyes followed her. These two were gray and old before their time, but the flame of love still burned bright and clear.

"You will not be long, dear," Gordon Ravenspur said. A somewhat sentimental remark in the ordinary way, but not in this place where the parting of a minute might mean parting for all time. Mrs. Gordon smiled back upon her husband.

"I am going to bed," she said. "Never mind me. I feel sleepy."

Gordon Ravenspur nodded sympathetically. He knew what his wife meant as if she had put her thoughts into words. She had been terribly upset over Vera and now that the danger was past a heavy reaction set in.

"Why should we sit here like this?" Geoffrey exclaimed. "Vera and Marion, I'll play you two a game at billiards. Come along."

Marion smilingly declined. She touched the back of Ravenspur's wasted hand.

"I am going to stay here just for a few minutes and take care of grandfather," she said; "then I will go to bed. Give Vera twenty in a hundred, and I will bet you a pair of gloves that she beats you easily."

The young people went off together and in the excitement of the game other things were forgotten. Vera played well and Geoffrey had all his work cut out to beat her. Finally Vera ran out with a succession of brilliant flukes.

"Well, of all the luck!" Geoffrey cried. "Let's play another game, but after that exhibition of yours I must have a cigarette. Wait a moment."

The cigarettes were not in their accustomed place. Geoffrey ran up the stairs to his bedroom. He passed along the dusky corridor on his return. In the gallery all was dark and still, save for something that sounded like two figures in muffling velvet robes dancing together. It seemed to Geoffrey that he could actually hear them breathing after their exertions.

With a quickening of his heart he stopped to listen. Surely somebody buried under many thick folds of cloth was calling for assistance.

"Who is there?" Geoffrey called. "Where are you?"

"Just under the Lely portrait," came a stifled response. "If you don't –"

The voice ceased. In that instant Geoffrey had recognized it as Aunt Gordon's voice.

Heedless of danger to himself he raced down the corridor, his thin evening pumps making little or no noise on the polished floor. Nor had Geoffrey lived here all these years for nothing. He could have found the spot indicated blindfolded.

He could see nothing, but he could hear the struggle going on; then he caught the flash of something that looked like a blue diamond. It must have been attached to a hand, but no hand was to be seen. Geoffrey caught at nothingness and grasped something warm and palpitating. He had the mysterious assailant in his grip; perhaps he held the whole mystery here. He heard footsteps pattering along the corridor as Mrs. Gordon ran for assistance. He called out to her and she answered him.

She was safe. There was no doubt about that. No longer was there any need for caution on Geoffrey's part. His fingers closed on a thin scraggy throat from which the flesh seemed to hang like strips of dried leather. At the same time the throat was cold and clammy and slippery as if with some horrible slime. It was almost impossible to keep a grip on it. Moreover, the mysterious visitor, if slight, was possessed of marvelous agility and vitality.

But Geoffrey fought on with the tenacity of one who plays for a great end. He closed in again and bore the foe backwards. He had him at last. If he could only hold on till assistance came, the dread secret might be unfolded.

Then the figure took something from his pocket; the air was filled with a pungent, sickly sweet odor, and Geoffrey felt his strength going from him. He was powerless to move a limb. One of those greasy hands gripped his throat.

In a vague, intangible way Geoffrey knew that that overpowering blinding odor was the same stuff that had come so near to ending the head of the family. If he breathed it much longer, his own end was come.

He made one other futile struggle and heard approaching footsteps; he caught the gleaming circle of a knife blade swiftly uplifted, and his antagonist gave a whimper of pain as a frightened animal might do. The grip relaxed and Geoffrey staggered to the floor.

"That was a narrow escape," a hoarse voice said.

"Uncle Ralph!" Geoffrey panted. "How did you get here? And where has the fellow gone?"

"I was close at hand," Ralph said coolly. "A minute or two sooner and I might have saved Gordon's wife, instead of your doing it. See, is there blood on this knife?"

He handed a box of matches to Geoffrey. The long, carved Malay blade was dripping with crimson. But there were no signs of it on the floor.

"Let us follow him," Geoffrey cried eagerly. "He can't be far away!"

But Ralph did not move. His face was expressionless once more. He did not appear to be in the least interested or excited.

"It is useless," he said, in his dull mechanical tones. "For in this matter you are as blind as I am. There are things beyond your comprehension. I am going down to see what is happening below."

He began to feel his way to the staircase, Geoffrey following.

"Are we never going to do anything?" the younger man exclaimed passionately.

"Yes, yes. Patience, lad! The day of reckoning is coming as sure as I stand before you. But to follow your late antagonist is futile. You might as well try to beat the wind that carries away your hat on a stormy day."

Mrs. Gordon sat in the dining-hall, pale, ashen, and trembling from head to foot. It seemed as if an ague had fallen upon her. Every now and then a short hysterical laugh escaped her lips, more horrible and more impressive than any outbreak of fear or passion.

And yet there was nothing to be done, nothing to be said; they could only look at her with moist eyes and a yearning sympathy that was beyond all words.

"It will pass," Mrs. Gordon said faintly. "We all have our trials; and mine are no worse than the rest. Gordon, take me to bed."

She passed up the stairs leaning on the arm of her husband. Time was when these things demanded vivid explanations. They were too significant now. Ralph crept fumblingly over the floor till he stood by Marion's side. He touched her hand; he seemed to know where to find it. The hand was wet. Ralph touched her cheek.

"You are crying," he said, gently for him.

"Yes," Marion admitted, softly. "Oh, if I could only do anything to help. If you only knew how my heart goes out to these poor people!"

"And yet it may be your turn next, Marion. But I hope not – I hope not. We could not lose the only sunshine in the house!"

Marion choked down a sob. When she turned to Ralph again he was far off feeling his way along the room – feeling, feeling always for the clue to the secret.

CHAPTER XII

GEOFFREY IS PUT TO THE TEST

The house was quiet at last. When these mysterious things had first happened, fear and alarm had driven sleep from every eye, and many was the long night the whole family had spent, huddled round the fire till gray morn chased their fears away.

But as the inhabitants of a beleaguered city learn to sleep through a heavy bombardment, so had the Ravenspurs come to meet these horrors with grim tenacity. They were all upstairs now, behind locked doors, with a hope that they might meet again on the morrow. Only Geoffrey was up waiting for his uncle Ralph.

He came at length so noiselessly that Geoffrey was startled, and motioned to him that he should follow him without a word.

They crept like ghosts along the corridor until they reached a room with double doors at the end of the picture gallery. Generations ago this room had been built for a Ravenspur who had developed dangerous homicidal mania, and in this room he had lived virtually a prisoner for many years.

After they had closed the two doors, a heavy curtain was drawn over the inner one, and Ralph fumbled his way to the table and lighted a candle.

"Now we can talk," he said quietly, "but not loud. Understand that the matter is to be a profound secret between us and that not a soul is to know of it; not even Vera."

"I have already given my promise," said Geoffrey.

"I know. Still there is no harm in again impressing the fact on your mind. Geoffrey, you are about to see strange things, things that will test your pluck and courage to the uttermost."

Geoffrey nodded. With the eagerness of youth he was ready.

"I will do anything you ask me," he replied. "I could face any danger to get at the bottom of this business."

"You are a good lad. Turn the lamp down very low and then open the window. Have you done that?"

"Yes, I can feel the cold air on my face."

Ralph crossed to the window and, putting out his hand, gave the quaint mournful call of the owl. There was a minute's pause and then came the answering signal. A minute or two later and a man's head and shoulders were framed in the open window. Geoffrey would have dashed forward, but Ralph held him back.

"Not so impatient," he said. "This is a friend."

Geoffrey asked no questions, though he was puzzled to know why the visitor did not enter the castle by the usual way. At Ralph's request he closed the window and drew the heavy curtains and the lamp was turned up again.

"My nephew," said Ralph. "A fine young fellow, and one that you and I can trust. Geoffrey, this is my old friend, Sergius Tchigorsky."

Geoffrey shook hands with Tchigorsky. To his intense surprise he saw the face of the stranger was disfigured in the same way as that of his uncle. Conscious that his gaze was somewhat rude he looked down. Tchigorsky smiled. Very little escaped him and to him the young man's mind was as clear as a brook.

"My appearance startles you," he said. "Some day you will learn how your uncle and myself came to be both disfigured in this terrible way. That secret will be disclosed when the horror that haunts this house is lifted."

"Will it ever be lifted, sir?" Geoffrey asked.

"We can do so at any time," Tchigorsky replied in his deep voice. "You may be surprised to hear that we can place our hand on the guilty party at a moment's notice and bring the offender to justice. Your eyes ask me why we do not do so instantly. We refrain, as the detectives refrain from arresting one or two of a big gang of swindlers, preferring to spread their nets till they have them all in their meshes. There are four people in this business, and we must take the lot of them, or there will be no peace for the house of Ravenspur. You follow me?"

"Perfectly," Geoffrey replied. "An enemy so marvelously clever must not be treated lightly. Do you propose to make the capture to-night?"

Ralph Ravenspur laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh and was mirthless. His scarred face was full of scornful amusement.

"Not to-night or to-morrow night, or for many nights," he said. "We have all the serpent wisdom of the Old World against us, the occult knowledge of the East allied to the slippery cunning that Western education gives. There will be many dangers before we have finished, and the worst of these dangers will fall upon you."

Ralph brought his hand down with a sudden clap on his nephew's shoulders. Tchigorsky regarded him long and earnestly as if he would read his very soul.

"You will do," he said curtly. "I am satisfied you will do and I never made a mistake in my estimate of a man yet. Ravenspur, are you ready?"

"Ay, ay. I have been ready this long time."

The lamp was extinguished and list slippers were donned, and with no more provision than a box of wax matches they left the room. Instructed by Ralph Ravenspur, they fell behind him, each holding by the coat-tail of the other. Down the corridor they went, down the stairs, along stone-flagged passages until they reached the vast series of cellars and vaults over which the castle was built.

There were many of these with twists and turns and low passages; the place was large enough to conceal a big force of troops. And yet, though it was pitchy dark and intricate as a labyrinth, the blind man made no error; he did not hesitate for a moment.

Well as Geoffrey imagined that he knew the castle, he was fain to confess his utter ignorance alongside the knowledge displayed by the blind guide.

Ralph pulled up suddenly and began to speak.

"I brought you here to-night, Geoffrey," he said, "so that you might have the first lesson in the task that lies before you. Listen! can you hear anything?"

"I hear the roar of the sea, the waves grating on the shingle."

"Yes, because we are on a level with the sea. There are deeper vaults yet, which you will see presently, and they are below the level of the sea. Our ancestors used to place their prisoners there, and, by removing a kind of sluice, allowed the tide to come in and drown them. You see, those walls are damp."

They were, indeed. As a wax vesta flared up, the dripping stones and the long white fungi gave the place a weird appearance. Then Ralph dropped suddenly, extinguished his match, and drew his companions behind a row of cupboard-like timbers.

"Somebody is coming," he whispered.

The others could hear nothing. But the blind man's powers of hearing were abnormal. It seemed a long time before the sound of footsteps could be heard. Then a figure in white, a fair figure with long shining hair hanging down her back and carrying a taper, crept down the steps.

An exclamation trembled on Geoffrey's lips – an exclamation of alarm, of admiration, of the utmost astonishment. But Ralph laid a hand on his mouth. The figure passed into the vault beyond.

"It was Marion!" said Geoffrey in a thrilling whisper. "And yet it did not look like Marion. She seemed so dreamy; so far off."

"She was walking in her sleep," Ralph said quietly.

"But the danger of it, the danger!"

"My dear boy, there is no danger at all. Blind as I am, I found out this peculiarity of Marion's directly I returned. Danger to her! I would not have a hair of her head injured to save Ravenspur from destruction. Geoffrey, it is through Marion and Marion alone, that we are going to solve the mystery."

"Ay," Tchigorsky muttered, "that is so."

Ralph raised his hand to impose silence. The soft returning footfalls were clear to the ears. Then, rigid, unbending, with dilated eyes, Marion passed, the flash of the lantern behind her.

"Come," said Ralph, "let us return. A good night's work, Tchigorsky!"

"Ay," Tchigorsky murmured; "a good night's work, indeed."

CHAPTER XIII

REELING OFF THE THREAD

It was fortunate for all parties that Geoffrey was possessed of strong nerves, or he would have been certain to betray himself and them.

Since he had left school at the time when the unseen terror first began to oppress Ravenspur, he had known nothing of the world; he had learnt nothing beyond the power to suffer silently and the power of love.

To confide in him was, perhaps, a daring thing on the part of Ralph Ravenspur. But, then, Ralph knew his world only too deeply and too well, and he rarely made a mistake in a man. All the same, he followed as closely as possible the meeting between Marion and Geoffrey the following morning.

Marion came down a little pale, a little quieter and more subdued than usual. Geoffrey rallied her in the spirit of mingled amusement and affection that he always assumed to Marion. His voice was natural and unaffected. Ralph was grimly satisfied. He knew now that his ally had brains as well as courage.

"I believe you have been sitting up writing poetry," Geoffrey laughed.

"Indeed, I had a very long night's rest," Marion responded. "And I can't imagine why I look so pale and washed-out this morning!"

"Bad dreams and an evil conscience," Vera suggested demurely.

Marion laughed. Usually at meal times the young people had the conversation entirely to themselves. Sometimes the elders joined in; sometimes they listened and smiled at the empty badinage; usually they were wrapped in their gloomy thoughts. Ralph's face had the expression of a stone idol, yet he followed every word that was said with intense and vivid interest.

"Bad dreams, indeed," Marion admitted. "They were with me all night. It seemed to me that I was wandering about all night looking for something. And I had nothing on but my nightdress. In India as a child I used to walk in my sleep. I hope I am not going to do that again."

Marion laughed and passed on to another subject. Curiously enough, she seemed to shrink from speaking of her life in India. Of her dead parents she would discourse freely; of her own early life she said nothing. It had always seemed to Geoffrey that Marion's childhood had been unhappy. There was an air of gentle melancholy when her features were in repose, an air far older than her years.

Meanwhile Ralph had been following all this keenly. He appeared to be interested in his breakfast. The streaming sunshine filtered through the great stained glass windows full upon his scarred face; his head was bent down upon his plate.

But the man's mind was at work. He had his opportunity to speak to Geoffrey presently.

"You will do," he said approvingly. "Keep up that easy, cheerful manner of yours. Whatever happens, try to ignore it; try to keep up that irresponsible boyish manner. You will find it invaluable in disarming suspicion later, when one false move may dash all our delicate plans to the ground."

"I will do anything you require of me, uncle."

"That is right; that is the spirit in which to approach the problem. And, remember, that what may appear to you to be the most trivial detail may prove to be of the utmost importance to our case. For instance, I am going to ask you to do something now that may produce big results. I want you to get your grandfather's permission to use the top room over the tower."

"But what can I want it for? It is useless to me."

"At present, yes; but later it will be useful. You require it for an observatory. You are going to try to repair the big telescope. You are enthusiastic on the subject, you are hot-foot to get to work at once. There is nothing but lumber there."

"Boxes belonging to Marion, uncle. Cases that have remained unpacked ever since she came over from India."

Ralph smiled in his most inscrutable manner.

"Mere trifles," he croaked. "But, there, I am one of the men who deny there are such things as trifles. You may lose a pin out of your watch, a trifle hardly visible to the eye a yard off. And yet your costly watch, with its marvelous mechanism, is useless without that 'trifle.' Now go."

An hour later and Geoffrey was busy in the corridor with the big telescope, the telescope that nobody had troubled about at Ravenspur for many years. Geoffrey, in his shirt sleeves, was polishing up the brasses. Vera was with her mother somewhere.

There had been no trouble in getting permission from Rupert Ravenspur. It was doubtful if he even heard Geoffrey's request. Everything the young people asked they got, as a rule. Why not, when a day might cut off their lives and their little pleasures for all time! The head of the family was fast becoming a fatalist. So far as he was concerned, there was no hope that the terror would ever lift. He had escaped once; the next time the foe would not fail. But there would be rest in the grave.

Marion found Geoffrey in the corridor. The yellow and purple lights from the leaded windows filled the place with a soft, warm glow. Marion's dark hair was shot with purple; her white dress, as she lounged in a window seat, was turned to gold. She formed a wonderfully fair and attractive picture, if Geoffrey had only heeded it. But, then, Geoffrey had no eyes for any one but Vera.

"What are you going to do?" Marion asked. "Read your fortune in the stars? Get inspiration from the heavenly bodies to combat the power of darkness?"

"I'm going to have a shot at astronomy again," Geoffrey replied, in his most boyish and most enthusiastic manner. "I was considered a bit of swell at it at school. And when I saw this jolly old telescope lying neglected here, I made up my mind to polish my knowledge. I'm going to set it up in the tower turret."

"But it is packed full of boxes – my boxes."

"Well, there is plenty of room for those boxes elsewhere – in fact, we've got space enough to give every box a room to itself. There is an empty bedroom just below. Presently I'm going to shunt all your lumber in there."

Marion nodded approvingly. Of course if Geoffrey said a thing it was done. He might have turned the castle upside down and the girls would have aided and abetted him.

"I should like to be present when those boxes are moved," she said. "There are hundreds of rare and curious things that belonged to my mother – things that the British Museum would long to possess. Remember, my ancestors were rulers in Tibet for thousands of years. Some day I'll show you my curios. But don't begin to move those boxes till I am ready to assist."

"I shall not be ready for an hour, Marion."

"Very well, then, I shall be back in an hour, astronomer."

Geoffrey finished his work presently. Then he ran up to the turret-room and opened the door. The place was dusty and dirty to a degree, and filled with packing-cases. Apparently they were all of foreign make – wooden boxes, with queer inscriptions, lacquered boxes, and one fragile wooden box clamped and decorated in filigree brass.

"A queer thing," Geoffrey murmured. "And old, very old, too."

"Over a thousand years. There is only one more like it in the world, and no Christian eyes save four have ever looked upon it. When you take that box from the room, see that it is the last, Geoffrey. You hear?"

It was Ralph who spoke. He had appeared silently and mysteriously as usual. He spoke calmly, but his twitching lips were eloquent of suppressed excitement.

"Very well," Geoffrey said carelessly. He was getting used to these strange quick appearances and these equally strange requests. "It shall be as you desire, uncle."

Ralph nodded. He gave a swift turn of his head as if looking for some one unconsciously, then he crossed the room and stooped down beside the brass-bound box, which was at the bottom of a pile of packages. His long fingers felt over the quaint brasses.

"A most remarkable-looking pattern," said Geoffrey.

"It is not a pattern at all," Ralph replied.

"The quaint filigree work is a language – the written signs of old Tibet, only you are not supposed to know that; indeed, I only found it out myself a few days ago. It had been a long search; but, as I can only see with my fingers, you can understand that. But this is part of the secret."

Geoffrey was profoundly interested.

"Tell me what the language says?" he asked.

"Not now – perhaps not at all. It is a ghastly and terrible thing, and even your nerves are not fireproof. There is only one thing I have to ask you before I efface myself for the present. When you take up that box to carry it down stairs it is to slip through your fingers. You are to drop it."

"I am to drop that box. Is there anything else?"

"Not for the present. You are smiling; I feel that you are smiling. For Heaven's sake take this seriously; take everything that I say seriously, boy. Oh, I know what is in your mind – I am going in a clumsy way to get something. I might so easily get what I require by a little judicious burglary. That is what your unsophisticated mind tells you. Later you will know better."

Ralph turned cheerfully round and left the room. He paused in the doorway. "Don't forget," he said, "that my visit here is a secret. In fact, everything is a secret until I give you permission to make it public."

This time he left. Geoffrey had managed to drag one or two of the boxes away before Marion appeared. She reproached him gently that he had not waited for her. There might be spooks and bogies in those packages capable of harm.

"I dare say there are," Geoffrey laughed. "But you were such a long time. Every girl seems to imagine that an hour is like a piece of elastic – you can stretch it out as long as you like. At any rate I have done no harm. As far as I can judge there's only one good thing here."

"And what is that?" Marion asked.

Geoffrey pointed to the floor.

"That one," he said. "The queer brass-bound box at the bottom."

CHAPTER XIV

"IT MIGHT BE YOU"

Marion caught her breath quickly. The marble pallor of her face showed up more strongly against her dark hair. Geoffrey caught the look and his eyes grew sympathetic.

"What's the matter, little girl?" he asked. "It isn't like you to faint."

"Neither am I going to faint, Geoff. But I had forgotten all about that box. I cannot go into details, for there are some things that we don't talk about to anybody. But that box is connected with rather an unhappy time in my youth."

"Hundreds of years ago," Geoffrey said flippantly.

"Oh, but it is no laughing matter, I assure you. When my mother was a child she was surrounded by all the craft and superstition of her race and religion. That was long before she got converted and married my father. I don't know how it was managed, but my mother never quite broke with her people, and once or twice, when she went to stay in Tibet, I accompanied her.

"My mother used to get restless at times, and then nothing would do but a visit to Tibet. And yet, at other times, nobody could possibly have told her from a European with foreign blood in her veins. For months and months she would be as English as you and I. Then the old fit would come over her.

"There was not a cleverer or more brilliant woman in India than my mother. When she died she gave me these things, and I was not to part with them. And, much as I should like to disobey, I cannot break that promise."

It seemed to Geoffrey that Marion spoke more regretfully than feelingly. He had never heard her say so much regarding her mother before. Affectionate and tender as Marion was, there was not the least trace of these characteristics in her tone now.

"Did you really love your mother?" Geoffrey asked suddenly.

"I always obeyed her," Marion stammered. "And I'd rather not discuss the subject, Geoff. Oh, they were bad people, my mother's ancestors. They possessed occult knowledge far beyond anything known or dreamt of by the wisest Western savants. They could remove people mysteriously, they could strike at a long distance, they could wield unseen terrors. Such is the terror that hangs over Ravenspur, for instance."

Marion smiled sadly. Her manner changed suddenly and she was her old self again.

"Enough of horrors," she said. "I came here to help you. Come along."

The boxes were carried below until only the brass-bound one remained. Geoffrey stooped to lift it. The wood was light and thin, the brass-work was the merest tracing.

A sudden guilty feeling came over Geoffrey as he raised it shoulder-high. He felt half inclined to defy his uncle Ralph and take the consequences. It seemed a mean advantage, a paltry gratifying of what, after all, might be mere curiosity.

But the vivid recollection of those strained, sightless eyes rose before him. Ralph Ravenspur was not the man to possess the petty vice of irrepressible curiosity. Had it not been a woman he had to deal with, and Marion at that, Geoffrey would not have hesitated for a moment. Down below in the hall he heard the hollow rasp of Ralph's voice.

Geoffrey made up his mind grimly. He seemed to stumble forward, and the box fell from his shoulder, crashing down on the stone floor. The force of the shock simply shattered it in pieces, a great nest of grass and feathers dropped out, and from the inside a large mass of strange objects appeared.

"I am very sorry," Geoffrey stammered after the box had fallen.

"Never mind," she said, "accidents will happen."

But Geoffrey was rapt in the contemplation of what he saw before him – some score or more of ivory discs, each of which contained some painting; many of them appeared to be portraits.

Geoffrey picked up one of them and examined it curiously. He was regarding an ivory circle with a dark face upon it, the face of a beautiful fury.

"Why, this is you," Geoffrey cried. "If you could only give way to a furious passion, it is you to the life."

"I had forgotten that," Marion gasped. "Of course, it is not me. See how old and stained the ivory is; hundreds of years old, it must be. Don't ask any more questions, but go and throw that thing in the sea. Never speak of the subject again."

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