The Mystery of the Ravenspurs

A Romance and Detective Story of Thibet and England

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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Published: 1911
J.S. Ogilvie Publishing Co, New York
Serialized as „The Black Valley“: 1913
in »The Illustrated Companion«, New York
Serialized: 1914
in »Fitzroy City Press«, Victoria, Australia

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Foreword

to the Serial in The Illustrated Companion

This story was first brought out about a year ago under a somewhat different title in a high grade book and sold at $1.25 per copy, and at that price had a ready sale. The publishers were good friends of ours and as the story created such marked interest we secured from them the right to publish it as a paper-covered book, which we are selling at 25 cents each by the thousands of copies; indeed, we considered it so popular that we thought that all of the subscribers of THE ILLUSTRATED COMPANION would like to read the story and should enjoy the right. We go upon the principle that we ought not to withhold any good thing from our readers that we can afford to give them.

Our publication is published for our subscribers. Our subscribers were not created for our publication. Therefore we have secured the serial rights to the story and every one of our subscribers will enjoy the pleasure of reading this entrancing story of mystery and adventure whether they buy the book or not.—Ed. note.

Chapter I

The Shadow of a Fear.

A grand old castle looks out across the North Sea, and the 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 mediaeval 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 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 marvellous escapes from destruction.

The fear grew on them like a haunting 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 was 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, who almost longed 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 Marian 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 to be 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 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 the 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 bye 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 polished 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 past 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 centre 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 sombre 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 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 recognise 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 were 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 were 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 fingertips to the landing above.

He had made no idle boast. He knew every inch of the castle. Like a cat he crept to his 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 panelled 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 cognisance 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 today 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 night light 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 twisted 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 were 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 towards the window.

The fumbling, clutching, long hands rested for a moment on Ravenspurs 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 of 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 to his lips; he no longer struggled to breathe.

"I am all right," he said. His eye 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 centre 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 'pill-box' ever stood before 101; no patient ever passed the threshold.

Tchigorsky was a savant and a traveller to boot; a man who dealt in strange and 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 travelling, Tchigorsky spent all his time, seeing strange visitors from time to time, Mongolians, Hindoos, natives of Thibet—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, Abel?"

"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 banknote; 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 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 by 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 timetable!"

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 event 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 Ralph 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 his 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 the new mystery."

"Never," Ralph said, in a thrilling whisper. "Science is powerless here."

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 goodnight, 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 bedroom 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 brown 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 centre 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 sounds of fresh young voices. They were those of Vera and Geoffrey talking almost gaily as they turned their steps towards 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 it. 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 centre 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.

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.

Illustration:
He reeled back almost sick and faint with the perfume and the discovery he had made.

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 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, catlike 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 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 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 pie. 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 a see he and Ravenspur were alone. As a 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, just as 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 pulses were 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 man, with a seafaring air, opened the door.

"Is it you? Elphick?" Ralph asked.

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

"So you've got back at last, sir. Come in, sir. 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."

“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 towards 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 train 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, bowed, 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 recognise 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 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 ever 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 recognise 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 traveller in Thibet."

Illustration:
„I am more interested in occult matters than ever,"
Tchigorsky said gravely.

"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 traveller 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 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 anything 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 internal 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 priest is long.”

“Ah! I understand. I may die tonight. I should not mind. Still, let us argue the matter out. Say that I have already solved 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?"

"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 careless mocking curtsey, she turned to go.

"You are a fine antagonist," she said; "but I do not admit yet that you are 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 in to 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.

"Will you not 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 towards 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 she 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 fully of energy and action.

"Take this," he whispered. "Take it and the cure will he 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 anymore."

Geoffrey nodded approvingly. He slipped his arm round Marion's waist and kissed her in a brotherly fashion. Marion inclined towards 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 the 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. An then an angel came down and laid some 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," Geoffry 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 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 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 analyse, 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 tolled 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, whom 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 at.

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 grey 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 might be 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 she 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 dark 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 recognised it as Aunt Gordon’s voice.

Heedless of danger to himself, he raced down the corridor, his thin evening shoes 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 marvellous 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 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 grey 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 that 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 marvellously clever must not be treated lightly. Do you propose to make the capture tonight?”

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 make a mistake in my estimate of a man yet. Ravenspur, are you ready?”

“Aye; aye. 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.”

“Aye,” 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!”

“Aye,” 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 marvellous 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 live. 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 a 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 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 Thibet 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 Thibet, 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 downstairs 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 Thibet I accompanied her.

“My mother used to get restless at times, and then nothing would do but a visit to Thibet. 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 as the terrors that hang 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 shivered it in pieces, a great nest of grass and feathers dropped out, and from the inside a large mass of strange objects appeared.

Illustration:
The force of the shock simply shivered it in pieces...

"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 cruel 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 the thing in the sea. Never speak of the subject again."

Geoffrey promised. He strode out of the house and along the terrace. As he was descending the steps, a hand touched his arm, Ralph stood there.

"Give it me," he said, "at once."

"Give you what, uncle?"

"That ivory thing you have in your pocket. I felt certain it was there. Give it to me. Assume you have cast it over the cliffs. Marion will be satisfied."

"But I promised Marion that—"

"Oh, I know. And if you knew everything, you would not hesitate for a moment to comply with my request."

"Uncle, I cannot do this thing."

A hard expression came over Ralph's face.

"Listen," he said in his rasping voice. "'The lives and happiness of us all are at stake. The very existence of the woman you love is in your hands."

"I have schemed for this," he said. "I expected it. And now you are going to baulk me. It is not as if I did not know what you possess."

"That is because you must have overheard my conversation with Marion."

"I admit it," Ralph said coolly. "I listened, of course. But you found it, and I heard what I expected. It is for you to say whether the truth comes out or not."

"The truth! the truth!" Geoffrey cried passionately. "It must out!"

"Then give me that miniature. I'll ask you on my knees if you like."

There was an imploring ring in the speaker's voice.

Geoffrey hesitated.

"If no harm is to come to Marion," he said, "I might break my word."

Ralph gripped him by the arm convulsively.

"I swear it," he whispered. "On my honor be it. Have I not told you before that not for all Ravenspur would I have a hair of that girl's head injured! If ever a man in this world meant anything, I mean that. The miniature—come!"

And Geoffrey, with a sigh, handed the ivory disc to Ralph.

Chapter XV

Ralph Ravenspur's Conceit.

"I should like to know why you wanted the ivory picture?"

It was Geoffrey who asked the question. He and Ralph Ravenspur were moving along the lanes that led up to the cliffs. They were deep lanes, with overhanging hedges on either side—lanes where it was not easy for two conveyances to pass.

"I dare say you would," Ralph replied. "But not at present. In due course you must know everything. Geoffrey, you are fond of novel reading?"

"Yes, especially books of the Gaboriau type. And yet, in all my reading, I never knew a more thrilling mystery than that of the ivory portrait."

"You had a good look at it, then?"

"Of course I did. The likeness to Marion was amazing. It might have been her own photograph on the ivory. It was the same yet not the same—Marion transformed to an avenging fury."

"An ancestress of hers, no doubt?"

"Of course. The idea of it being Marion herself is out of the question."

"That you may dismiss at once," Ralph said. "The age of the medallion proves that, and Marion is an angel."

"She is. Uncle Ralph, I am fearfully puzzled. What can Marion's queer ancestors and all that kind of thing have to do with our family terror?"

Ralph declined to say, beyond the fact that there was a connection. A horseman was coming pounding down the lane, and he stepped aside instinctively.

"Jessop," he murmured; "I can tell by the trot of his horse."

Jessop, one of the farmers on the estate, it was.

Geoffrey regarded his companion admiringly. He seemed to be able to dispense with eyes altogether. A long course of training in woodcraft stood him in good stead now.

The apple-cheeked farmer pulled up so as to pass the squire at a walking pace.

"Morning, Jessop," Geoffrey cried, cheerfully. "Where are you going dressed in your best. And what are you doing with that feminine-looking box?"

The big man grinned sheepishly.

"Riding into town." he explained. "Fact is, missus and myself have got a lodger, a great lady, who's taken our drawing-room and two bedrooms. They do say it's

going to be the fashion for the 'quality' to spend their holidays right in t'country. Its a rare help to us these hard times."

Ralph Ravenspur turned round suddenly upon his nephew.

"Is it a fact?" he demanded. "Is it as Jessop says?"

"I believe so," Geoffrey replied. "I know that for the last five years the influx of visitors along this lonely coast has been steadily growing. It seems to have become quite the thing for good-class people to take cottages and farm-houses miles away from everywhere, but I have not heard of any of our tenants having them before."

"I be the first here, sir," Jessop replied. "The lady came over and said she had been recommended to come to us. Not as I wanted her at first, but six guineas a week for two months ain't to be despised. But the lady has a power of parcels to be fetched and carried, surely. That's why I'm off to town."

Jessop touched his hat and rode on.

For a time Ralph was silent.

"It's some time since I last visited an English watering-place," he said, "and Scarborough was the spot in question. We had a furnished house there one season, a good house, well furnished, and, beautifully situated. We paid eight pounds a week for it, and it was considered to be a lot of money. Don't you think that Jessop's lodger must be a very extravagant kind of woman?"

Geoffrey laughed. Like most young men born to the purple, he had a light estimate of the value of money.

"Now you come to think of it, perhaps so," he said. "Over at Brigg, the farmers fancy they do well if they get ten shillings a room for the week."

Again Ralph was thoughtful. He and his companion came up out of the lane, and then it dawned upon Geoffrey that the other had turned, not towards the cliff as arranged, but inland in the direction of Jessop's farm.

There was a long, deep lane to the west side of the stone farmhouse, into which Ralph turned. From a gap in the hedge a peep into the garden could be obtained. There was a trim lawn, bordered by old-fashioned flowers, two bay windows led from the house to the garden. These bay windows led from the show-rooms of the house, rooms never opened except on state occasions. The house might have been made fit for anybody with very little alteration.

Ralph sat down on the grass and slowly filled an aged black pipe.

"I'm going to smoke here while you see Mrs. Jessop. I have a fancy to find out all about this fashionable lady who buries herself in the country like this. Call it curiosity if you like, but do as I ask you. If you can see the lady so much the better."

Geoffrey agreed cheerfully. A moment or two later and he was gossiping with the buxom farmer's wife in the kitchen, a glass of amber, home-brewed ale before him. He was a favorite with the tenantry, and none the less beloved because of the cloud that was hanging over him.

"It does one's eyes good to see you again, Mr. Geoffrey," Mrs. Jessop cried. "And you so cheerful and bright, and all, dear, dear! I'm main sorry I can't ask you in the parlor, but we've got a lodger."

"So Jessop told me. Not that I don't feel far more comfortable here. And what may your distinguished visitor be like, Mrs. Jessop?"

“Dark and handsome. And dressed ever so. Might be a princess, who had just slipped off her throne. And clever. She had books and books, some in languages that look like Chinese puzzles.”

“Some great society dame, no doubt.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised, Mr. Geoffrey. But not English, I should fancy, though she speaks the language as well as you or I. And simple, too. Just tea and toast for breakfast, with a little meat and rice for luncheon and dinner with stewed fruit. And she never drinks anything but water. What she spends a week in food wouldn’t keep one of our laborers. And she has pounds’ worth of hot-house flowers sent from York every day.”

Mrs. Jessop paused. There was a rustling of something rich, and a lady entered the kitchen. Geoffrey rose instantly from the table upon which he had been seated.

He saw a tall woman who might have been anything between thirty and fifty years of age, a woman of great beauty. It was the hard, commanding style of beauty that men call regal. She might have been a queen, but for the faint suggestion of the adventuress about her. To Geoffrey’s bow she made the slightest possible haughty recognition.

“I’m going out, Mrs. Jessop,” she said. “I shall be back to luncheon. If a telegram should happen to come for me, I shall be along the cliffs between here and Beauhaven.”

She flashed out of the kitchen all rustling and gleaming, and leaving the faint suggestion of some intoxicating perfume behind her. And yet, notwithstanding, her proud indifference, it seemed to Geoffrey that she had regarded him with more than passing interest just for the moment.

“She is very beautiful,” he said. “She is a total stranger to me, and yet she reminds me of somebody else, somebody whose name I can’t recall, but who is totally different. It is a strange sort of feeling that I cannot explain.”

“She’s interested, for all her haughtiness,” said Mrs. Jessop. “I’m sure if she has asked me one question about your family, she has asked a thousand.”

Geoffrey strolled away from the house. There was a short cut to the place where Ralph was seated, and this short cut lay along the lawn. Geoffrey’s feet made no noise. As he passed the window of the sitting-room he looked in.

The place was full of flowers, white flowers everywhere. There were azaleas and geraniums and carnations, with delicate foliage of tender green, thousands of blooms, arranged wherever a specimen glass or a bowl could go.

Standing with his back to the window, a man was arranging them. And the man was a Hindoo, or other Eastern, one of the men Geoffrey had seen going through that queer incantation on the cliffs. Strange, more than strange, that Mrs. Jessop had said nothing of him.

Geoffrey prudently slipped away before he had been seen. He found his uncle doggedly smoking under the hedge. He looked like patience personified.

“Well,” he said, “have you anything wonderful to relate?”

“Pretty well,” Geoffrey replied. “To begin with, I have actually seen the lady.”

“Ah! But go on. Tell me everything, everything, mind, to the minutest detail.”

Geoffrey proceeded to explain. Whether he was interesting his listener or not he could not tell, for Ralph had assumed his most wooden expression; indeed, a casual spectator would have said that he was not paying the slightest attention.

Then he began to ask questions, in a languid way, but Geoffrey could see that they were all to the point.

"I should not be surprised," he said, "if the man you saw in the house was one of the men you saw on the cliffs. Mrs. Jessop said nothing about him, because she knew nothing. So he was arranging the lady's flowers. What flowers?"

"Azaleas and carnations and geraniums. Nothing else."

"Well, there may be worse taste, if there can be bad taste with flowers. Any color?"

"Yes; they were all white. I was a little surprised at that, considering that the lady was so dark and Eastern-looking."

"Of course, you ascertained her name?"

"Indeed, I did nothing of the kind. I forgot all about it. But I had a good look at her, and the description I gave you is quite correct. Uncle, I don't want to seem unduly curious, but I fancy you expected to find this lady here."

Ralph rose to his feet slowly, and knocked out the ashes of his pipe. He turned his face towards the castle.

"I am not altogether surprised," he said.

Not another word was said for some time. Ralph appeared to be deeply cogitating, so deeply that Geoffrey asked of what he was thinking.

"I was thinking," Ralph said slowly, yet drily, and with the same dense manner, "that a pair of dark, gold-rimmed glasses would improve my personal appearance."

Chapter XVI

The White Flowers.

Surely enough, when Ralph Ravenspur came into the great hall, where tea was being served, he was wearing a pair of dark glasses, with gold rims. Slight as the alteration was in itself, it changed him almost beyond recognition. He had been doing something to his face also, for the disfiguring scars had practically disappeared. As he came feeling his way to a chair, the slight thread of conversation snapped altogether.

"Don't mind me," he said quietly. "You will get used to the change, and you cannot deny it is a change for the better. One of the causes leading to this vanity was a remark I overheard on the part of one of the servants. She expressed the opinion that I should look better in glasses. That opinion I shared. I have no doubt the maid was correct."

All this was uttered in the dry, soft, caustic manner Ralph constantly affected. Nobody answered, mostly because it was assumed that no reply was expected. With a cup of tea in his hand Ralph began to speak of other things.

Leading from the hall was a big conservatory. Here Marion was busy among her flowers. She was singing gently as she snipped a bud here and there, and Vera was helping her. Curled up in an easy-chair, Geoffrey was absorbed in a book. The smoke from his cigarette circled round his head.

Ralph placed his cup down again, and felt his way into the conservatory. He stood in the doorway listening to the controversy going on beyond.

"I don't fancy I shall like it," said Vera. "It will be too cold, too funereal."

"My dear child," Marion cried, "then we will abandon the idea. Only don't forget that it was your own suggestion. You said it could look chaste."

"Did I really? Then I had forgotten all about it. And we are not going to abandon the idea. It shall not be said that I change my mind like a weather cock. The flowers on the dinner-table to-night are all going to be white."

Marion paused in the act of cutting a lily.

"I don't fancy I would," she urged. "After all, second thoughts are best. White flowers on a table do suggest a funeral—that is, if they are all white. And in an unfortunate house like this anything melancholy is to be discouraged. I think I will throw these blooms away—"

"You will do nothing of the kind," Vera cried. "White it shall be, and you and I shall arrange them in the best possible style. Why, you have enough already. Come along and we'll 'fix' up the table at once. Uncle Ralph, how you startled me."

"Did I?" Ralph said coolly. "I fancy it is my mission in life to startle people. What have you two been quarrelling about?"

"We were not quarrelling," Vera replied. "Marion insists that white flowers on a dinner-table are cold and chilly, not to say funereal. I say, they are chaste and elegant. And, to prove that I am right, the table tonight will be decorated with white flowers."

"Not with my consent," Marion laughed. "I have set my face dead against the whole business. But spoilt Vera always gets her own way."

Vera smiled, as she passed on with an armful of the nodding white flowers. Ralph passed slowly into the conservatory and closed the stained-glass door behind him.

Then he crossed the tiled floor rapidly, as if his eyes were all that could be desired, and slipped up a glass panel at the far end of the conservatory. From this point there was a sheer fall down the cliffs on to a hard, sandy beach-below.

"Just the same," Ralph muttered. "Nothing altered. And just as easy."

He crossed the tiles again and passed into the great stone flagged hall in his slow way. Then he proceeded to light his pipe and strolled into the grounds. Past the terrace he went, until he came to the cliffs where he was out of sight of the house.

Then with the confidence of the mountain goat, he made his way to the beach, the hard strip of beach that lay under the shadow of the castle. Here he fumbled for some time among the damp, slippery rocks, feeling for something with infinite care and patience.

His perseverance was rewarded at last. His hands lay on a mess of flowers, damp and sodden, and yet comparatively fresh. He lifted one to his nostrils and sniffed it.

"As I thought," he said; "as I expected. How cunning it all is; how beautifully worked out! And nothing, however small, is left to chance. Well, I came home in the nick of time, and I have found an ally I can depend upon. Only it was just as well not to let Geoffrey know that I knew of Jessop's lodger before to-day. I wonder if my lady guesses how carefully she is being watched?"

Half an hour later Ralph was in the castle again, wandering about in his restless way and appearing to be interested in nothing as usual. Presently the great bell began to clang in the turret, and the family party gathered in the dining-room before dinner. Vera was the last to arrive.

"How lovely you look," Geoffrey whispered.

Vera laughed and colored. She had a white dress without ornament and without flowers, save a deep red rose in her hair.

"That red rose is the crowning touch," said Geoffrey.

"I thought it was to be all white to night," said Ralph. He had caught the whispered words, as he seemed to catch everything. "Was that not so, Vera?"

"Not for me, sir," Vera replied. "I am in white."

"I wish you could see her," Geoffrey said tenderly; "she looks lovely. Her eyes are so blue, her skin is like the sunny side of a peach."

"And your tongue is like that of a goose," Vera laughed. "Never mind, Uncle Ralph. Never mind. If you can't have the inestimable advantage of gazing on my perfect beauty, you shall have the privilege of sitting by me at dinner."

Geoffrey pleaded with comic despair, but Vera was obdurate. As the bell clanged again, she laid a hand light as thistle-down on Ralph's arm. She was brighter and more gay than usual this evening, and Marion played up to her, as she always did.

The elders were silent. Perhaps the white flowers on the table checked them. They were so suggestive of the wreaths on a coffin.

When once the cloth was drawn in the good old-fashioned way, and the decanters and lamps and glasses stood mirrored in the shining dark mahogany, the resemblance was more marked than ever. The long strip of white damask, whereon lamps and flowers and decanters rested, might have been a winding sheet. Rupert Ravenspur protested moodily.

"It's dreadful in a house like this," he said. "Who did it?"

"I am the culprit, dearest," Vera admitted prettily. "Marion did all in her power to prevent me, but I would have my own foolish way. If you will forgive me I will promise that it shall not occur again."

Rupert Ravenspur smiled. It was only when he was looking at Vera that that tender relaxation came over his stern old face. Then his eyes fixed on the flowers, and they seemed to draw him forward.

"You are forgiven," he said. "Marion was right, as she always is. What should we do without her cheerfulness and good advice? Upon my word, I feel as if those flowers were drawing all the reason out of me."

Nobody replied. It was a strange and curious thing that everybody seemed to be regarding the waxen blossoms in the same dull, sleepy, fascinating way. All eyes were turned upon them as eyes are turned upon some thrilling, repulsive performance. The silence was growing oppressive and painful.

Geoffrey gave a little gasp, and laid his hand upon his chest.

"What is it?" he said. "There is a pain here like a knife. I am burning."

Nobody took the slightest notice. Only Ralph seemed to be alive, and yet there was no kind of expression on his face. Heads were drawing nearer and nearer to the vases where the graceful flowers were grouped—those innocent-looking blooms which were the emblems of all that was fair and fine and beautiful.

What did it mean? What strange mystery was here? Nobody could speak, nobody wanted to speak; all were sinking, lulled and soothed into a poppyland sleep; even Geoffrey seemed to be fighting for something he knew not what.

Then Ralph reached out his hand to the foot of the table. His long, lean fingers were tangled in the strip of damask down the mahogany table on which lamp and decanters and glasses and dishes of fruit were placed.

With a vigorous pull he brought the whole thing crashing on the polished floor, where two pools of paraffin made a blaze of the wreck that Ralph had caused. Then he slid over the floor and opened one of the windows, letting in the pure, fresh air from the North Sea.

Chapter XVII

Whence did They Come?

In the darkness nobody spoke for a moment. Not one of them could have said anything for a king's ransom. Apart from the feeling of suffocation, the gradual poppy sleep of death that filled the room as a great wave suddenly engulfs some rocky cave, the dramatic horror of the darkness held them fast.

At the same time there was something of a shock, a healthy shock in the plunge from light to gloom. A fitful, purple gleam still flickered where the blazing paraffin had licked the hard, polished oak floor; the breath of the sea breeze was bracing. It was Marion who first came to herself as one comes out of a horrid nightmare.

"Oh! oh!" she shuddered. "Who opened the window?"

Nobody responded for a moment. Ralph had crept to Geoffrey's side. It was marvellous how he found his way in the intense darkness.

"Say you did it,"' he whispered. "You must say you did it. Speak."

"I suppose I did," Geoffrey murmured. "I seem to recollect something of the kind."

"You have saved our lives," said Marion. "Will somebody ring the bell?"

Servants came without much dismay or surprise. They were used to amazing things at Ravenspur. It would have caused no more than a painful sensation to come in some night after dinner and find the whole family murdered.

"Bring more lamps," Ralph Ravenspur said quietly.

Lamps were brought. The disordered litter on the floor was swept up, the broken globes, the dainty china, the glass and silver. The white flowers were no longer there. This was a puzzle to everybody but Ralph, who had gathered them at the first distraction, and thrown them out of the window.

There was silence for a minute or two after the servants had withdrawn. Then Rupert Ravenspur dashed his fist on the table in a passion of despair.

"Great Heaven!" he said. "How long? how long? How much more of this is it possible to bear and still retain the powers of reason? What was it?"

"Could it have been the flowers?" Vera suggested. "It was my fault."

“No, no,” Marion cried. “Why your fault? Those white blossoms were innocent enough; we packed them ourselves; we arranged them together.”

“Still, I believe it was the flowers,” Geoffrey observed. “Why should they have fascinated us in that strange way? It was horrible!”

Horrible indeed, and not the less so because the horrible was how conspicuous by its absence. That innocent flowers, pure, white blossoms, could lend themselves to a dark mystery like this was almost maddening.

And yet it must have been so, for no sooner had the flowers been removed and the air of heaven had entered the room than the grip and bitterness of death were past.

“I am sure we were near the end,” Marion cried. “Geoff, was it you who snatched the cloth from the table?”

Geoffrey was about to deny the suggestion when his eyes fell upon Ralph’s face. It was eager, almost pleading in its aspect. Like a flash the changing expression was gone.

“It must have been mechanical,” Geoffrey murmured. “One does those things and calls them impulses. Inspiration would be a better expression, I fancy.”

They crowded round him and gave him their thanks, all save Ralph, who sat drumming his fingers on the table as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Nothing seemed to draw him out of his environment.

Still, it was another man who came creeping to Geoffrey’s room when the lights were extinguished and the castle was wrapped in slumber. There was an inner room looking out over the sea, which Geoffrey used indifferently for a smoking-room and study.

“I can smoke my pipe here without a chance of our being overheard,” he said.

“Well, was the adventure this evening creepy enough for you?”

Geoffrey shuddered slightly. Flagrant, rioting dangers would have no terrors for him. It was the unseen that played on the nerves of the imagination.

“Horrible!” he said. “But why this mystery?”

“As far as I am concerned, you mean? My dear Geoffrey; it is imperative that I should be regarded by everybody as a poor, blind worm who is incapable for good or evil. I want people to pity me, to make way for me, to treat me as if I were of no account, a needless cumberer of the ground. I want to see that you prevent these tragedies by sheer chance. I will strike when the time comes!”

The hoarse voice had sunk to a whisper, the sightless eyes rolled, the thin fingers crooked as if dragging down an unseen foe to destruction. As suddenly Ralph changed his mood and laughed noiselessly.

“Let us not prophesy,” he said. “What did you think of the episode?”

“I don’t know what to think about it.”

“Then you have no theory to offer?”

“No, uncle. I am in the dark. That is where the keen edge of the terror comes in. I should say it was the flowers. As the atmosphere of the room grew warmer, as the heat from the lamps drew out the fragrance of the blooms, the perfume seemed to become overpowering. The perfume riveted attention, then arrested the senses, and gradually sense and feeling appeared to go altogether.”

“Perfectly right, Geoffrey. Still, there is nothing very wonderful about it. Lucretia Borgia used the same means to despatch her victims. A poisoned bouquet was a favorite weapon of hers, you remember.”

“But the poison there was conveyed through the palms of the hands. Why do we never hear of that sort of poison nowadays?”

Ralph smiled as he refilled his pipe.

“I’ve got some of it myself,” he said; “or at least Tchigorsky has. It is poor, inartistic stuff compared to some of the poisons known to Tchigorsky and myself. There are Eastern poisons unknown to science; toxicology little dreams of the drugs that Tchigorsky and your poor uncle wot of.

“You are right. Those flowers were impregnated with the deadly drug that comes out with warmth. It comes as quickly as a breath of wind, and does its work and vanishes almost immediately, leaving no trace behind. Another minute and the whole family of Ravenspur had been no more. There would have been a fearful sensation; doctors would have discoursed learnedly—and vaguely—and there would have been an end of the matter. Not a soul in England would have had the remotest idea of the source of the tragedy. Look here.”

“That was on the table tonight,” he said. “Take it in your hands. Smell it. Do you recognise anything beyond the legitimate perfume?”

Geoffrey held the perfect bloom to his nostrils. He could detect nothing further.

“It seems to me to be as innocent as beautiful,” he said.

“So it is; so it is—at present. Give it me back again. See, I have here a little white, dull powder. In it is the one-thousandth part of a grain of the deadly drug. I dust the powder on the carnation, thus. The natural moisture in the leaves absorbs it, and the flower presents a normal aspect. Smell it.”

“I smell nothing at all,” said Geoffrey.

“Not yet. Hold it to the lamp for ten seconds.”

Geoffrey did so. At the end of the brief space he placed it to his nostrils as Ralph suggested. Immediately a drowsy feeling came over him, a desire for sleep, a desire to be at rest in body and mind in heart and pulses. Indeed, it seemed to him as if his heart had stopped already.

Through a yellow-scented mist he seemed to see his uncle and hear the latter’s voice commanding him to drop the carnation. He could not have done it to save himself from destruction. Then the flower was plucked away.

“How long have I been asleep?” he asked, suddenly opening his eyes.

“You have been across the Styx and back in exactly fifty seconds,” Ralph said gravely. “Now you see the effect of that stuff. Wonderfully artistic isn’t it?”

Geoffrey gazed at the flower with sickening horror. Ralph seemed to divine this, for he picked it up, sniffed it coolly and placed it in his buttonhole.

“The evil effect has gone, believe me,” he said. “The dose was very small, and I did not mix it with water, which makes a difference.”

“Still, I don’t follow,” Geoffrey said. “We know those flowers were cut and arranged by Vera and Marion. It would have been impossible for any one to have entered the dining-room and replaced them with other white flowers. And for anybody to have had the time to impregnate them one by one—oh! it is impossible!”

“Not at all, Geoffrey. A mystery is like a conjuring trick—seemingly insoluble, but you know how it is done, and then it becomes bald and commonplace. Suppose the stuff is mixed with water and the mixture placed in a small spray worked by an indiarubber ball. Then one goes into the dining room for say half a minute or so, gives two or three rapid motions of the hand, and the thing is accomplished.”

“Yes, that sounds easy. You speak as if you knew who did it.”

“Yes,” Ralph said, with one of his spasmodic smiles, “I do.”

“You know the author of this dastardly thing. Tell me.”

“Not yet. I dare not tell you, because you are young and might betray yourself. I could not confide my secret to any one, not even the best detective in England. It is only known to Tchigorsky and myself. You shall help me in drawing the net round the miscreants, but you must not ask me that.”

“And to-night’s doings are to remain a secret?”

“Of course. Nobody is to know anything. They may conjecture as much as they like. Good heavens! if any one in the house were to know what I have told you to-night, all my work would be undone. You are my instrument, by which I ward off danger without attracting attention to myself. You are the unsuspecting boy, who by sheer good luck foils the enemy. Keep it up, keep it up; for so long as you appear young and unsophisticated, there is less of the deadly danger.”

Chapter XVIII

Mrs. Mona May.

Geoffrey was slightly puzzled, but like a good soldier, he asked no questions. More and more he was coming to recognise that it was Ralph’s to command and his to obey. Doubtless Ralph had some good reason when he treated his nephew like a puppet, but then the puppet was a long way from a fool, and as the days went on, it came home to him with an increasing force that he had a master mind to deal with.

He had been told off this afternoon to lurk more or less concealed at the top of the steep pitch leading to the village, and there wait until something happened. It came at the end of a few minutes in the shape of a lady in perfect cycling costume, wheeling a machine up the hill towards Jessop’s farm. As she came nearer to the spot where Geoffrey was smoking, a ragged nomad sprang from the hedge and demanded alms. The man was coarse and threatening; he was by no means sober, and his demands took the by no means modest form of a shilling.

A second later there was a slight scream and Geoffrey darted forward. The sight of a woman in distress sufficed for him; Ralph was forgotten in an instant. There was a scuffle and a plunge, a rapid exit of the nomad, and hat in hand Geoffrey was receiving the thanks of a beautiful woman, who was pleased to assure him that he was her preserver.

“It is nothing,” Geoffrey stammered; “nothing, really.”

It was not usual for him to be confused like this. But then he was standing face to face with the handsome stranger who had taken Mr. Jessop's rooms, the lady with the love of white flowers, the woman who employed Oriental servants who were given to strange incantations, the creature in whom Ralph Ravenspur had taken so vivid an interest.

And Geoffrey's confusion grew none the less as it flashed upon him that the intoxicated tramp had been the god in the car designed by Ralph to bring this introduction about.

He steadied himself. There was work before him now.

"You exaggerate my poor services," he said.

"Not at all, I assure you," the lady said. Her eyes held a strange fascination; her voice was low and sweetly sedative. She was years older than Geoffrey, but just the kind of siren who drove young men mad, or lured them to destruction. "Few strangers would have faced so formidable an opponent for me."

"Most of my countrymen would," Geoffrey said. "I hope you have a better opinion of Englishmen than that. But Englishmen are not favorites abroad."

The dark eyes were dancing with amusement.

"You are under the impression that I am not English?" she asked.

"Well, there is a certain grace," Geoffrey stammered, "that spoke of—"

"Foreign blood. Precisely. But all the same, I am proud to call myself an Englishwoman. My name is Mrs. May—Mona May. You are Mr. Geoffrey Ravenspur?"

"At your service. I had the pleasure of seeing you the other morning in Mrs. Jessop's kitchen. Meanwhile, to prevent any further trouble from our predatory friend, I am going to walk with you as far as the farm."

Mrs. May raised no objection; on the contrary, she seemed pleased with the idea. She was dangerous; she was mixed up in some way with the conspiracy against the peace and happiness of the house of Ravenspur, and yet Geoffrey found it hard to resist her fascinations.

She spoke almost perfect English, her dress, style and manner were insular, but there was a flashing grace about her, a suggestion of something warm and Eastern, that gleamed and flashed in spite of her severe cycling dress and the wheel she pushed along so skilfully.

She gave a sigh of regret as the farmhouse was reached.

"Well, I suppose we must part," she said. "Really, it seems years since I spoke to a gentleman and I have only been here for days. I have been ordered absolute rest and quietness for the benefit of my health, and upon my word I am getting it. Would you take pity upon my loneliness and come to tea?"

Many an older man than Geoffrey had been excused from yielding to such a request. Those eyes were so dark and pleading, and the man was young. Besides, he had an excuse. Had not his uncle Ralph planned this thing, and was it not intended to bring about an introduction? Besides, once inside that room, it might be possible to find something that in the future would yield great results.

"I shall be only too pleased," Geoffrey murmured.

"Then come along," Mrs. May said gaily. "If you are fond of a good cup of tea, then I have some of the most perfect in the world."

She led the way into the old-fashioned drawing-room, which she had had rendered beautiful with flowers. The stiff furniture looked stiff no longer. The hand of an artistic woman had been here, and the whole aspect was changed.

"You should have seen it when I came here," Mrs. May smiled as she followed Geoffrey's glance. "It was like a condemned cell. And yet there are things of price here. A little alteration and a few flowers—ah! what a difference flowers make!"

She pointed to her own floral decorations. The room was ablaze with them. And they were all scarlet.

There was not a single bloom of any other kind to be seen.

"They match my style of beauty," Mrs. May laughed. "I never have any other here."

"You do not care for white flowers?" Geoffrey asked.

"I abhor them. They suggest beautiful maidens cut off in their prime, dead children, the tomb, and all kinds of horrors. I would not have one in the house."

Geoffrey was discreetly silent. Remembering the hundreds of white flowers he himself had seen in this very room not so long ago, this speech staggered him. In a dazed kind of way he watched Mrs. May light a spirit lamp under a silver kettle, after which she excused herself on the score of fetching the famous tea.

Geoffrey picked up an album and turned the leaves over rapidly. There were soldiers, one or two native Indian officials, a great number of society people, professional beauties, and the like, and—and Marion!

Yes; her fair, tender face smiled from the embossed, richly-gilt page. The picture had been taken some years ago, but there was no mistaking those pure features. Geoffrey closed the book and walked over to the window. Surprise upon surprise had come upon him lately, but this was staggering.

When Mrs. May returned he was himself again. He could answer her questions gaily and smoothly. It was only when he was on his way home again that he recollected how much information he had imparted and how little he had got in return.

"You must come and see me again," Mrs. May said. "Now can't you come up some evening and dine with me? Say Thursday. Unless I hear from you to the contrary I shall see you on Thursday at seven. A primitive time, but then we are in the country."

"You may be certain," Geoffrey said carelessly, "that I shall come if possible. Good-bye, Mrs. May. In ordinary circumstances my people would have called upon you. You will know why it is impossible."

Mrs. May pressed Geoffrey's hand with gentle sympathy.

"You have my real regrets," she said. "What a horrible thing it is to think that you are all powerless to help it. Good-bye."

Geoffrey found Ralph at the entrance to the castle gate. There was a queer smile on his face, a smile of amused expectation.

"You found her charming?" he asked.

"And clever," said Geoffrey. "I guessed your plot, uncle. She is very clever."

"The cleverest woman in the world, the most wicked, the most unscrupulous. Of course she asked you to dinner, and of course your will go. Nobody is to know of it, mind."

"Uncle, how did you guess that?"

“I’ll tell you presently. And I’ll tell you many things you will have to say and leave unsaid to—Mrs. May.”

“‘Tell me why Marion’s photograph is in her album?”

“So she showed you that?”

“No; I found it out by accident. Is Marion connected with her?”

“Very closely, indeed. She is Marion’s evil genius. And yet through that pure and innocent girl we are going to strike at the heart of the mystery. Ask me no questions now; tonight we will go carefully into the matter.”

Chapter XIX

Vera is not Pleased.

Any stranger looking along the terrace at Ravenspur would have been inclined to envy the lot of those who had their habitation there. It looked so grand, so dignified, so peaceful. Brilliant sunshine shone upon the terrace; against the grey stone of the grand old facade, the emerald green of the lawns rose refreshing to the eyes, those old lawns like velvet that only come with the passing of centuries.

People from the rush and fret of cities, excursionists, who had their sordid, hum-drum life in towns, turned longing eyes to Ravenspur. Anybody who lived in a place like that must be happy.

And some of them looked it. Geoffrey, for instance, as he lounged on the terrace with a cigarette between his strong, white teeth. He was seated with a cap over his eyes and appeared to be given over to a pleasant reverie. A rod and empty fishing basket stood by his side.

Ralph Ravenspur lounged up to him. Perhaps he had been waiting for his nephew. At any rate, he always knew where to find him. He sat with the sunshine full upon his sightless eyes, and smoked his pipe placidly.

“There is nobody about?” he asked.

“Nobody,” Geoffrey replied. “Do you want to say anything to me?”

Ralph made no reply. Geoffrey watched him curiously.

“Do you know you seem to be a long way off me this afternoon?” he said presently. “I can’t quite explain my meaning. Since you have worn those glasses you look a different man. There, now you are yourself again.”

“Is the difference very marked?” Ralph asked.

“Very marked, indeed. Honestly, I should not have known you.”

Ralph gave a sigh, whether of sorrow or satisfaction Geoffrey could not say.

“Time will prove whether the disguise is of any value or not,” he said. “I came to ask you about this evening. Are you going?”

“Of course I am. Mrs. Mona May fascinates me. On the whole, I have deemed it advisable to say nothing to the others. We cannot call upon Mrs. May, and they need not know that I have had any intercourse with her.”

Ralph nodded. Perhaps he alone knew the real need for secrecy in this matter.

“Quite right,” he said. “The less said the better. She wrote to you, of course?”

“Oh, yes. I had the letter yesterday.”

“And destroyed it, of course?”

“Upon my word, I’ve forgotten. I see you are angry with me. Well, I will try not to make a similar mistake again.”

From the expression of his face Ralph was greatly moved. His features flamed with anger, he was trembling with passion to his finger-tips. Then his mood suddenly changed. He laid a kindly hand on Geoffrey’s knee.

“My boy,” he said earnestly. “There are reasons, weighty reasons, why I cannot take you entirely into my confidence. If I did so, you would see the vital necessity of caution even in the most minute matters. You will see that Mrs. May’s letter is destroyed at once.”

“I will, uncle. The rest of the family believe I am going to Alton tonight.”

Ralph nodded. He seemed already to have forgotten the circumstance. He had fallen into one of the waking reveries that were deep as sleep to most men. Geoffrey spoke to him more than once, but failed to gain the slightest attention. Then Ralph rose and moved away like a man in a dream.

Geoffrey lounged about till he had finished his cigarette. He tossed the end away and then proceeded towards the house. He would get that letter and destroy it without further delay. But this was easier said than done, for the simple reason that the letter was nowhere to be found. High and low Geoffrey searched for it, but all to no purpose.

Had he left it in the dining-room or the library? Possibly in the latter place, seeing that he had written a couple of notes there earlier in the day. It was dim, not to say gloomy in the library, and for a moment Geoffrey failed to see Vera was seated at the table.

He crossed over and touched her caressingly on the cheek. She looked up coldly.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“A letter, dearest,” Geoffrey replied. “But why do you look so strange?”

“Oh, you ask me that? It is a letter you are looking for. Then perhaps I maybe so fortunate as to assist you. I have just found a letter lying here addressed to you. As it lay with face open I could not but read it. See here!”

A square of thick scented notepaper filled with a dashing black calligraphy shook before Geoffrey’s eyes. It was Mrs. May’s writing beyond a doubt. Geoffrey flushed slightly as he took the note.

“Read it,” Vera said quietly; “read it aloud.”

Geoffrey did so. It struck him now—it had never occurred to him before—that the writer was slightly caressing in her manner of phrasing. There was a suggestion of something warmer and more personal than the stereotyped lines implied.

“So this is a the Alton where you are going to-night?” Vera went on. “Who is the woman? How long have you known her?”

The quick blood came flaming to Geoffrey’s face. He had never seen Vera hard and cold like this before. It was a woman and not a girl who was speaking now. Geoffrey resented the questions; they came as a teacher addresses a child.

“I cannot tell you,” he said. “It has to do with the family secret.”

“And you expect me to believe this, Geoffrey?”

“Of course I do,” Geoffrey cried. “Did you ever know me tell you a lie? And after all the years we have been together you are going to be jealous of the first woman who comes along. Have I been mistaken in you, Vera?”

The girl’s beautiful eyes filled with tears. She had been sorely vexed and hurt, far more hurt than she cared Geoffrey to know. For it seemed to her that he had wilfully deceived her, that he was going to see this creature of whom he was secretly ashamed, that he had lied so that he could seek her company without suspicion in the minds of others.

“If you give me your word of honor,” Vera faltered, “that you—”

“No, no,” Geoffrey cried. “I merely state the facts, and you may believe them or not as you please. Who Mrs. May is I decline to say. How I became acquainted with her I also decline to explain. Suffice it that she is Mrs. May, and that she has rooms at Jessop’s farm.”

“And that is all you are going to tell me, Geoffrey?”

“Yes, Vera. If you have lost your faith in me—”

“Oh, no, no. Don’t say such cruel things, Geoff. Whom have I beyond my parents and you in the whole world? And when I found that letter, when I knew what you said about Alton was—was not true—”

She paused, unable to proceed. Her little hands went out imploringly and Geoffrey caught them in his own. He drew her to his side, and gazed into her eyes.

“Darling,” he whispered, “you know that I love you.”

“Yes, dear; it was foolish of me to doubt it.”

“I love you now and always. I can never change. I did not intend to tell you about this woman because it was all part of the secret. The wise man among us has said it, and his word is law. I am speaking of Uncle Ralph.”

Vera nodded with a brighter glance. Had not she a secret in common with Ralph?

“Say no more,” she whispered. “I am ashamed of myself.”

Geoffrey kissed the quivering lips passionately.

“Spoken like my own Vera,” he said. “Now I will give you my word of honor—”

“No, no. It is not necessary, Geoffrey. I was foolish. I might have known better. Not another thought will I give to Mrs. Mona May.”

Vera spoke in all sincerity. But our thoughts are often our masters, and they were so in this case. Mona May was a name graven on Vera’s mind, and the time was coming when with fervent gratitude she blessed the hour when she had found that letter.

Chapter XX

A Fascinating Woman.

Mrs. Jessop’s simple parlor had been transformed beyond recognition. The the Chippendale furniture had been brought forward; the gaudy settees and sofas had been covered with fine, Eastern silks and tapestries. A pair of old Dresden

candlesticks stood on the table, and under pink shades the candles cast a glamor of subdued light upon damask and silver and china.

As Geoffrey was ushered in, Mrs. May came forward. She was dressed entirely in black, her wonderfully fine arms and shoulders gleamed dazzling almost as the diamonds that were as frosty stars in the glorious night of her hair. One great red bloom of some flower unknown to Geoffrey was in her breast. As to the rest, the flowers were all scarlet. The effect was slightly dazzling.

Mrs. May came forward with a smile.

"So you have managed to elude the Philistines," she said. "Ah! I guessed that you would say nothing to your friends about our little dinner."

There was an eager note in the words that conveyed a half question.

Geoffrey smiled.

"May I venture to suggest that the knowledge is not pleasing to you?" he said.

"Well, I admit it. In the circumstances to explain would have been a bore. Your people cannot call on me, and being old-fashioned, they might not care for you to come here alone. Therefore, being a man of the world, you told them nothing about it."

Geoffrey smiled, as he took the proffered cigarette. Had he not been warned against this woman by Ralph, her subtle flattery would have put him off his guard. It is always so sweet and soothing for a youngster to be taken for a man of the world.

"You have guessed it all," he said. "My grandfather is grand seigneur. He has no toleration for anything that is not en regle. What an exquisite cigarette!"

Mrs. May nodded. They were excellent cigarettes, as also was the liqueur she insisted upon pouring out for Geoffrey with her own hands. He had never tasted anything like it before.

And the dinner when it came was a perfect little poem in its way. Not a flash of wine on the table had not a history. Long before the meal was over Geoffrey found himself forgetting his caution.

Not that Geoffrey had anything to be afraid of. He knew that in some way this woman was connected with the tragedy of his race; for all that he knew to the contrary, she might be the spirit directing the tragedies.

She was his enemy, though she smiled upon him with a dazzling fascination calculated to turn cooler heads than his. But at any rate, she had not asked him here to poison him at her own table. Mrs. Mona May was too fine an artist for that.

Presently Geoffrey came out of his dream to find himself talking. Mrs. May seemed to be putting all the questions, and he was giving all the answers. And yet, directly, she asked no questions at all. She was sympathetic and interested in the family, as she explained with kindness and feeling.

"And there is that poor blind gentleman," she said sweetly.

Her eyes were bent over her dessert plate. She was peeling a peach daintily. There was just for the fraction of a second a ring in her voice that acted on Geoffrey as a cold douche does to a man whose senses are blurred with liquor. Some instinct told him that they were approaching the crux of the interview.

"My uncle Ralph," he said carelessly. "He is a mystery. He keeps to himself, and says nothing to anybody. Sometimes I fancy he is a clever man, who despises us,

and at other times I regard him as a man whose misfortunes have dulled his brain and that he strives to conceal the fact."

Mrs. May smiled; but she returned to the charge again. But strive as she would, she could get no more on this head out of Geoffrey. She wanted to know who the man was, and all about him. And she learnt nothing beyond the fact that he was a poor nonentity, despised by his relations. Geoffrey's open sincerity puzzled her. Perhaps there was nothing to learn after all.

"Strange that he did not stay away," she murmured, "knowing that the family curse must overtake him."

Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"What can an unfortunate like that have to live for?" he asked. "He is broken in mind and in body, and has no money of his own. It is just like the old fox who crawls to the hole to die. And we are getting used to the curse by this time."

"You have no hope, no expectation, of the truth coming to light?"

It was on the tip of Geoffrey's tongue to speak freely of his hopes for the future. Instead he bent his head over the table, saying nothing till he felt he had full control of his voice once more. Then he spoke in the same hopeless tones.

"I have become a fatalist," he said. "Please change the subject."

Mrs. May did so discreetly and easily. And yet in a few moments the doings of the Ravenspurs were on her tongue again and, almost unconsciously, Geoffrey found himself talking about Marion. Mrs. May listening quietly.

"I have seen the young lady," she said. "She has a nice face."

"Marion is an angel," Geoffrey cried. "Her face is perfect. You have only to look at her to see what she is. Nobody with a countenance like that could do wrong, even if she wished it. No matter who and what it is, everybody comes under Marion's sway. Men, women, children, dogs, all turn to her with the same implicit confidence."

"Marion seems to be a warm favorite," Mrs. May smiled. "And yet I rather gather that she does not hold first place in your affections?"

"I am engaged to my cousin Vera," Geoffrey explained. "We were boy and girl lovers before Marion came to us. Otherwise—well, we need not go into that. But I never saw any one like Marion till to-night."

Mrs. May looked up swiftly.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I mean exactly what I say. In certain ways, in certain lights, under certain conditions your face is marvellously like that of Marion's."

As Geoffrey spoke he saw that the blood had left the cheek of his companion. Her face was deadly pale, so pale that the crimson flower in her breast seemed to grow more vivid. There was a motion of the elbow, and a wine-glass went crashing to the floor. The woman stooped to pick up the fragments.

"How clumsy of me!" she said. "And why are you regarding me so intently? My heart is a little wrong, the doctors tell me—nothing serious, however. There!"

She looked up again. She had recovered, and her face was tinged with the red flush of health again. But her hands still shook.

But Geoffrey was taking no heed.

He had dropped the match, he was about to apply to his cigarette, and was staring out of the window. The blind had not been drawn; the panes were framed with flowers.

And inside that dark circle there came a face, a dark Eastern face, with awful eyes, filled with agony and rage and pain. Across the dusky forehead was a cut from which blood streamed freely.

Illustration:
And inside that dark circle there came a face,
a dark Eastern face, with awful eyes,
filled with agony and rage and pain.

"You are not listening to me," Mrs. May cried. "What is the matter?"

"The face! a face at the window!" Geoffrey gasped. "A horrible-looking man, not of this country at all; a man with a gash in his forehead. He seemed to be looking for something. When he caught sight of me he disappeared."

Mrs. May had risen and crossed to the long French window opening on to the lawn. Her back was towards Geoffrey, and she seemed determined—or so he imagined—to keep her face concealed from him.

"Strange," she said, carelessly, though she was obviously disturbed. "Surely you were mistaken. Some trick of the brain, a freak of imagination."

Geoffrey laughed. Young men at his time of life, men who follow healthy pursuits, are not given to tricks of the imagination. His pulse was beating steadily; his skin was moist and cool.

"I am certain of it," he said. "What is that noise?"

Somebody was calling down the garden. Long before this time the good people of the farm had gone to bed.

"Shall I go and see what it is?" Geoffrey asked.

"No, no," Mrs. May whispered. "Stay here, I implore you. I would not have had this happen for anything. What am I saying?"

She passed her hand across her face and laughed unsteadily.

"There are secrets in everybody's life, and there are in mine," she said. "Stay till I return. There will be no danger for me, I assure you."

She stepped out into the darkness and was gone. Geoffrey stooped and bent over a dark blot or two that lay on the stone sill at the bottom of the window.

"Blood," he muttered; "blood beyond a doubt. It was no delusion of mine."

From outside came the swish of silken drapery. It was Mrs. May returning. She seemed herself again by this time.

"The danger is past," she said, "If danger you choose to call it. The next time we meet we shall laugh together over this comedy. I assure you it is a comedy. And now I am going to ask you to leave me."

The woman was playing a part, and playing it extremely well. With less innate knowledge, Geoffrey would have been thoroughly deceived. As it was, he affected to make light of the matter. He held out his hand with a smile.

“I am glad of that,” he said. “You must let me come again, when, perhaps, you may be disposed to allow me to assist you. Good-night, and thank you for one of the pleasantest evenings of my life.”

The door closed behind Geoffrey, and he stumbled along in the darkness until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. Out in the road some one crept up to him, and laid a hand on his arm. Like a flash Geoffrey had him by the throat.

“Speak, or I will kill you,” he whispered. “Who are you?”

“Come with me at once,” came the hoarse reply; “and release that grip of my throat. I am Sergius Tchigorsky.”

Chapter XXI

The Mystery Deepens.

Geoffrey recognised the deep, rasping tones of Tchigorsky directly. His hand dropped to his side. No need to tell him that danger was in the air. It was the thick, still night that goes with adventure.

“Something has happened?” Geoffrey asked.

“Something is going to happen unless we prevent it,” Tchigorsky replied. “The enemy has been foiled three times lately, and is getting uneasy. He begins to realise that he has to cope with somebody who understands the game. It is no use to work in this deadly, mysterious fashion as long as certain people can read the danger signals and act upon them, and therefore it has been decided to fall back upon more vulgar methods. You are not afraid of danger?”

“Not in the least. Try me.”

“The danger is great. You are dealing with some of the cleverest people on earth. If you are discovered you will be put away. Your courage will be tested to the utmost. Are you ready?”

Geoffrey hesitated but for a moment. His senses seemed to be braced and strengthened. He seemed to hear better all at once; his eyes penetrated farther into the gloom. There was a feeling of eagerness, of exultation, upon him. He took Tchigorsky’s lean claw and laid it upon his left wrist.

“Feel that,” he said. “Is not my pulse steady? I am longing to go forward. Only give me a chance to find the truth.”

“You will do,” he said. “And you will go alone on your expedition. You are acquainted with all the vaults and passages of the castle by this time; every inch of the ground is known to you. Give me your coat and shoes.”

Geoffrey handed them over, getting a pair of rubber-soled shoes and a rough pea-jacket in exchange. In the pocket of the latter he found a revolver.

“Now what am I to do?” he demanded.

“Stand here,” Tchigorsky explained. “Presently you will see a figure or two, perhaps more. You will not understand what they are saying, but that makes no difference. You are to follow them; stick to them. If nothing happens by dawn you

can afford to leave them to their own devices. If circumstances place you in dire peril, be brave, for help will not be far off."

Geoffrey might have asked another question or two, but Tchigorsky turned away abruptly and was speedily lost in the darkness. And then followed for Geoffrey the most trying part of the business, waiting for the first sign of the foe.

Half an hour passed, and still no sign. Had the affair miscarried and the miscreants got away in some other direction? Strain his ears as he would, Geoffrey could catch nothing. Then at length something soft and rustling seemed to be creeping along on the lawn on the other side of the hedge.

Geoffrey crept through the gap into the garden. Almost instantly he dropped on his face, for somebody carrying a lantern was softly creeping in his direction. It was the figure of a woman who had a black lace shawl so wrapped about her that in the feeble light it was impossible to make out her features. She paused and made a hissing sound between her teeth.

As if they had been evolved out of Geoffrey's inner consciousness, there appeared two men upon the lawn. One was lying on his back, his head supported on the arm of his companion. They were Indian natives of some kind, but of what race precisely Geoffrey could not say. The prostrate man had an ugly cut across his forehead; it was the same man that Geoffrey had seen looking through the window.

A crafty, ugly, sinister face it was, full of cunning malignity. The eyes were dull, but the fires of hate were still in them. The woman stooped down and produced cool bandages soaked in some pungent liquid, which she proceeded to bind round the brows of the injured man. Even at his respectful distance Geoffrey could catch the odor of the bandages.

He watched the weird, midnight scene with breathless interest. There was something creepy about the whole business. If these people had nothing to conceal, all this surgical work might have taken place indoors; they might have called assistance. Geoffrey tried to catch sight of the woman's features. But that was impossible. Still, there was something familiar about her. Geoffrey felt quite sure that he had seen that graceful figure before. She stood up presently, and Geoffrey no longer had any doubt.

It was Mrs. Mona May.

The injured man rose also. He staggered along on the arm of his companion, and Geoffrey could with some difficulty see them enter the sitting-room. He paused in some doubt as to his next move, but before he was called upon to decide, Mrs. May and the other native came out again.

Evidently they had left the injured man behind. Then they emerged into the road and started off rapidly towards the cliffs.

"Going some way by the pace they are walking," Geoffrey muttered, "and at the same time they must be back before daylight, or they would never have dared to leave that fellow at Jessop's. What a good thing I know the country."

Geoffrey followed at a respectful distance; his rubber shoes making no sound. For the time of year the night was intensely dark, which was in Geoffrey's favor. Also, with his close knowledge of the locality, he had no fear of making mistakes.

The couple were not more than fifty yards ahead of him. They had not the slightest idea they were being followed, seeing that they were talking earnestly and

none too quietly in a language that was Greek to Geoffrey. Now and again he caught the low laugh that came from the woman's lips.

By-and-bye the cliffs were reached, and here the two began to descend a path that would have been dangerous to unaccustomed feet even in the broad daylight. But the man seemed to know the way perfectly, and the woman followed without hesitation. They came presently to the firm sand, fringed by the ebbing tide.

Then they turned to the right, pausing at length before a solid-looking expanse of cliff that stood right under Ravenspur Castle. One moment they loomed darkly against the brown rocks and the next minute they seemed to be swallowed up by the cliffs. They had entered the mouth of a cave.

Geoffrey followed still more cautiously. On and on they went, until at length they paused. Then the light from the lantern grew stronger. From behind a ledge of seaweed-clad granite Geoffrey watched them furtively. They were waiting for something—a signal, probably—before going farther.

The signal seemed to come at last, from where it was impossible for Geoffrey to judge, and then the advance was resumed. Presently they emerged into the deep, below-tide level vault under the castle, where Geoffrey had seen Marion walking in her sleep.

Mrs. May turned to her companion and gave him some sharp command. She had lost all her levity, and Geoffrey could see that her dark eyes were glowing. The native salaamed and laid his hand upon the lantern. The next instant the place was plunged into pitchy darkness. Five, ten minutes passed, and nothing was heard but the lap of the ebbing tide on the shore. Then a hand was gently laid on Geoffrey's arm.

Chapter XXII

Deeper Still.

So startled was Geoffrey that he felt the moisture spurt from every pore like a rash. But fully conscious of his danger, he suppressed the cry that rose to his lips, nor did he move as he felt a thick cloak over his head. He slipped his revolver into his hand, and fumbled it against the cold cheek of his antagonist.

But the antagonist took it coolly. A pair of lips were close to Geoffrey's ear and the smallest, faintest voice spelt out the letters, T-c-h-i-g-o-r-s-k-y. Geoffrey put the weapon back in his pocket. At the same time he felt about till his fingers touched the hand of his companion. No doubt about it. The other was Tchigorsky beyond question. Perhaps he had been testing Geoffrey's courage and resolution; perhaps the danger had deepened unexpectedly.

Presently the light of the lantern popped up again, in response to some subtle signal, and once more the conspirators moved on to the vault above. Tchigorsky lifted his head.

"Where are they going?" Geoffrey asked.

Tchigorsky responded with one of his diabolical chuckles.

“They imagine that they are going into the castle,” he said. “But they are not going to accomplish that part of the programme.”

“But what do they want there?”

“What should they want? You know something of those now whose business it is to wipe you out root and branch. More artistic methods having failed, they may deem it necessary to fall back on more vulgar plans. There are five people sleeping in the castle—six with your Uncle Ralph—who stand in the way. It is possible if the fiends are lucky that the castle may be devoid of life by daybreak.”

Geoffrey could not repress a shudder.

“Friends, indeed!” he said. “But why not stop it? Why not let them enter and take them all red handed?”

“What could we gain by that? We could not connect them with past crimes! At worst they would get a few months in gaol as suspects. When the time comes we must smash them all. And the time is coming.”

Tchigorsky rose as if to go.

“I follow them,” he said; “you remain here, in the darkness. And if any one attempts to pass you do not let him do so. Don’t forget this thing. At all hazards you are not to let any one pass.”

Geoffrey nodded as Tchigorsky passed on his way. For a long time all was quiet, and then from above there came a startled cry followed by the sound of strife and a scream of pain and terror. It was all that Geoffrey could do to restrain himself from yelling in response and rushing to the spot. Then he became conscious that somebody was coming rapidly through she cave. He reached out his hand and grabbed at and caught a sinewy, slippery brown ankle.

It only needed that touch to tell Geoffrey that he was at grips with the native. Down the fellow came on the slippery rocks, and the next instant the two were engaged in a life or death struggle.

Young, strong, and vigorous as he was, his muscles knitted like iron with healthy exercise, Geoffrey knew that he had met his match. The native had a slight advantage of him in point of years; he was greased from head to foot, rendering a grip difficult, and his flying robe came asunder like cobwebs at the first strain. He fought with the abandon of a man who is reckless of life.

Over and over on the slippery rocks they rolled, each striving to get the other by the throat. By this time they were both breathing thick and fast, and Geoffrey’s mind began to wander towards his revolver. But to release his grip to get that might be fatal. He could hear his antagonist gasping as he rolled off a ledge of rock, and then Geoffrey lifted his opponent’s head and brought it down with a bang on the granite.

In the very instant of his triumph something whistled behind him, and a jagged piece of stone came smashing on to his temple.

He had a confused view of a native on his feet again, fast hurrying away, heard the rustle of garments, and a further rustle of more garments, and then his arm was closed upon a female figure whom he pulled to the ground by his side.

He felt the woman open her lips to scream, but he clapped his hand over her mouth.

“No, you don’t,” he said grimly. “One of you has escaped, and my friend the nigger has had a narrow escape, but I’ve got you, my lady. I’ve got you safe, and I don’t mean to let you go.”

He felt the slight figure in his arms tremble and palpitate; he heard voices above. Once more the slim figure shivered. His hand was torn from her mouth and the woman spoke.

“They are calling you,” she said. “For God’s sake let me go, Geoffrey!”

For an instant Geoffrey was too dazed and stunned to speak.

“Marion!” he gasped presently. “Marion!”

Marion cowered down, sobbing bitterly.

“You are surprised,” she said. “No wonder. You wonder what I am doing here, and I will tell you presently. But not now. I will place my secret in your hands. I will disguise nothing from you. For the present leave me.”

“Leave you here! Impossible.”

“But I am safe, quite safe, Geoffrey. Oh! if you have any feeling for one of the most miserable creatures in the world, leave me. Tell them above that those abandoned wretches have gone—that no sign of them remains. Consider what I have suffered and am suffering for your family, and try to help me.”

Conscious of his own weakness, Geoffrey pondered. He might be doing a serious injury to the delicate plans formed by Ralph Ravenspur, but he had given the promise, and there was an end of the matter.

Marion was in some way bound up with these people, but Marion was pure as the angels, and Marion would do no wrong. Why, then, should her good name be dragged in the mire?

“You are so good—so good to me.” Marion murmured. “Go before they become alarmed at your silence and leave me here. Say that you saw nothing. And when the house is quiet I shall make my way back again.”

Geoffrey retired upwards without further words. In the basement of the castle he found Tchigorsky and Ralph Ravenspur.

“They managed to elude you?” asked the former.

Geoffrey pointed to the ugly bruise on the side of his head.

“Yes,” he said; “they both got away. But for this bit of an accident fighting in the dark I might have captured the dusky conspirator.”

“Rather you had not, on the whole,” Ralph said. “Something gave them the alarm as they reached the passages. Of course their idea was to murder some or all of us in our beds, and our idea was to take them in the act. But they got the alarm and vanished. One of the fellows attacked me in the shrubbery just before dark, but I fancy he will not do it again.”

“I saw him,” said Geoffrey. “He came to Mrs. May’s for assistance. She pretended that I was mistaken, but she had to give in at last when circumstances became too strong for her. How did you manage to deal him that blow on the head, uncle?”

Ralph smiled grimly.

“I have my own means of protections,” he said. “What became of the fellow?”

Geoffrey explained all that had happened during and after the dinner at Jessop’s farm. His two listeners followed his statement with flattering interest. Yet all the time Geoffrey was listening intently for signs of Marion. Was she still in the

vaults, or had she managed to slip away to her bedroom? The thought of the delicate girl down there in the darkness and cold was by no means pleasant.

"We have managed to make a mess of it to-night," said Ralph. "How those people contrived to discover that there was danger afoot I can't understand. But one thing is certain—they will not be content to leave things as they are. They may try the same thing again, or their efforts may take a new and more ingenious direction."

"Which direction we shall discover," said Tchigorsky. "Can you let me out here, or shall I go by the same means that I entered?"

To Geoffrey's relief Ralph volunteered to open the hall door for his friend.

"Come this way," he said. "All the bolts and bars have been oiled, and will make no noise."

Geoffrey listened intently. He fancied that he could hear footsteps creeping up the stairs, and in the corridor a door softly closed. Then Ralph Ravenspur came back again.

"Tchigorsky has gone," he said. "After this it will be necessary for us to vary our plan of campaign a little. You have learnt something to-night. You know now that our antagonists are two Indians and a woman who is dangerous as she is lovely and fascinating. Ah! what a woman she is!"

"'Who is she?" Geoffrey asked.

"Ah! that I cannot tell you. You must be content to wait. I do not want you to know too much, and then there is no chance of your being taken off your guard. When the surprise comes it will be a dramatic one. The more you see of that woman and the more you cultivate her the more you will find to wonder at."

"But can I cultivate her after tonight?"

"Why, not? She does not know the extent of your knowledge; she has not the remotest idea that you have been helping to foil her schemes. Next time she will meet you as if nothing had happened."

Geoffrey thought of Marion and was silent. That one so pure and sweet should be mixed up with a creature like that was horrible. Ralph Ravenspur rose with a yawn. He seemed to have lapsed into his wooden state. He felt his way down the big flagged hall towards the staircase.

"We can do nothing more," he said. "I am going to bed. Good-night."

The door closed, and then Geoffrey was free to act. He could go down in to the vault and bring Marion up. But first he would try to ascertain if she were in her room. He passed up the stairs and along the corridor. Outside Marion's door he coughed gently.

The door opened, and Marion stood there clad in a fair white wrapper with her glorious hair hanging free over her shoulders. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Geoff," she whispered. "Geoff, dear Geoff!"

She fell into his arms, and pressed her lips long and clingingly to his. Her whole frame was quivering with mingled love and emotion. Then she snatched herself away from his embrace, and, with the single whispered word, "To-morrow," closed the door behind her.

Chapter XXIII

Marion Explains.

A brilliant sunshine poured into the terrace room where the Ravenspurs usually breakfasted. An innovation in the way of French windows led on to a tessellated pavement bordered with flowers on either side, and ending in the terrace overlooking the sea.

A fresh sea breeze came from the ocean; the thunder of the surf was subdued to a drone. In the flowers a number of bees were busy, bees whose hives were placed against the side of the house. They were Vera's bees, and there were two hives of them. Vera attended to them herself; they knew her, and she was wont to declare that in no circumstances could they do her any harm. That was why, as Geoffrey drily put it, she never got stung more than once a week.

"I believe one has been arguing with you now," Geoffrey laughed.

"No, indeed," she said. "And, anyway, it was my own fault."

"Irish," Geoffrey cried. "That makes the second since Monday. Let me see."

"I cant see the spot," he said. "Does it hurt much?"

"A mere pin prick, dear. I suppose you can get inoculated against that sort of thing. I mean that you can be stung and stung until it has no effect at all."

"Even by bees that know you and never do you any harm," Geoffrey laughed. "Bit I daresay you are right. Five years ago when we had that plague of wasps, Stenmore, the keeper, and myself destroyed over a hundred wasps' nests in one season. I must have been stung nearly a thousand times. After the first score I never noticed it; it was not so bad as the touch of a nettle."

"What! Has Vera been arguing with the bees again?"

The question came fresh and clear from behind the hives. Marion stood there; making a fair picture indeed in her white cotton dress. There was no shade of trouble in her eyes. She met Geoffrey's glance squarely. Her hand rested on his shoulder with a palpably tender squeeze.

It was the only kind of allusion she made to last night's doings. She might not have had a single care or sorrow in the world. She seemed to take almost a childlike interest in the bees, the simple interest of one who has yet to be awakened to the knowledge of a conscience. Geoffrey had never admired Marion more than he did at this moment.

"Marion is afraid of my bees," Vera said.

Marion draw away shudderingly from one of the velvety brown insects.

"I admit it," she said. "They get on one's clothes and sting for pure mischief. And I am a sight after a bee has been operating upon me. If I had my own way, there would be a fire here some day, and, then there would be no more bees."

They trooped into breakfast, disputing the point cheerfully. It was impossible to be downcast on so perfect a morning. Even the elders had discarded their gloom. Ralph Ravenspur mildly astonished everybody by relating an Eastern experience apropos of bees.

“But they were not like these,” he concluded. “They were big black bees and their honey is poisonous. It is gathered from noxious swamp flowers and, of course, it is only intended for their own food. Even those bees—”

The speaker paused, as if conscious that he was talking too much. He proceeded with his breakfast slowly.

“Go on,” said Marion. “I am interested.”

“I was going to say,” Ralph remarked in his croaking voice, “that even those bees know how to protect themselves.”

It was a lame conclusion, and Marion said so. Geoffrey glanced at his uncle. As plainly, as possible he read on the latter’s face a desire to change the conversation.

It was sufficiently easy to turn the talk into another channel, and during the rest of the meal not another word came from Ralph Ravenspur. Once more he was watching, watching for something with his sightless eyes.

And Geoffrey was watching Marion most of the time. She was gentle and gay and sweet as ever, as if strong emotions and herself had always been strangers. It seemed hard to recall the stirring events of the night before and believe that this was the same girl. How wonderfully she bore up for the sake of others; how bravely she crushed her almost overwhelming sorrow.

She stood chatting on the pavement after breakfast. She was prattling gaily to Geoffrey, as the others gradually vanished on some mission or another. Then her face suddenly changed; her grasp on Geoffrey’s arm was almost convulsive.

“Now then,” she whispered, “let us get it over.”

Geoffrey strolled by her side along the terrace. They came at length to a spot where they could not be seen from the house. Marion turned almost defiantly.

“Now I am going to speak,” she whispered.

“Not if it gives you any pain,” said Geoffrey.

“My dear Geoffrey; you don’t want to hear my explanation!”

“Not if it causes you the least pain or annoyance. I couldn’t do it.”

Marion laughed. But there was little of the music of mirth in her voice.

“Never be it said again that man is a curious creature,” she said. “You find me down in the vaults of the castle at midnight mixed up with murderers and worse; you compel me to disclose my identity and take me prisoner; you force me to plead for mercy and silence. And now you calmly say you don’t want to know anything about it! Geoffrey, are you indifferent to myself and my future that you speak like this?”

Geoffrey laid his hand on the speaker’s arm tenderly.

“Marion,” he said, “it is because I think so highly of you and trust you so implicitly that I am going to ask no questions. Can you be any the worse because you are bound by some tie to that woman yonder? Certainly not. Rest assured that your secret is safe in my hands.”

“But I must tell you certain things, Geoff. There is some one who comes to the castle, a friend of Uncle Ralph’s, who is an enemy of this—of Mrs. May’s. I don’t know whether you know the man—his name is Tchigorsky?”

No muscle of Geoffrey’s face moved.

“I fancy I have heard the name,” he said. “When does he come here?”

“‘I—I don’t know. Secretly at night, I expect. Oh! if I could only tell you everything. But I cannot—I dare not. If this Mr. Tchigorsky would only go away! I

fear that his presence here will eventually endanger Uncle Ralph's life. You may perhaps, give him a hint to that effect. Between Mrs. May and Tchigorsky there is a blood feud. It has been imported from Thibet. I can't say any more."

"And you interfered to save the lives of others?"

"Yes, yes. Some day you may know everything; but not yet. I am endangering my own safety, but I cannot sit down and see crime committed under my very eyes. It is all a question of an ancient secret society and a secret religion as old as the world. Tchigorsky has certain knowledge he has no right to posses. Don't press me, Geoff."

"My dear girl, I am not pressing you at all."

"No, no. You are very good, dear old boy. Only get Tchigorsky out of the way. It will be better for us all if you do."

Geoffrey murmured something to the effect that he would do his best. At the same time, he was profoundly mystified. All he could grasp was that Marion was bound up with Mrs. May in ties of blood, the blood of ancient Thibet.

"I'll do my best," he said, "though I fear that my best will be bad. Tell me, do you ever see this Mrs. May by any chance?"

"Oh, no, no. I couldn't do that. No; I can't see her."

Geoffrey began to talk about something else. When at length he and Marion parted she was sweet and smiling again, as if she hadn't a single trouble in the world.

For a long time Geoffrey lounged over the balcony with a cigarette, trying to get at the bottom of the business. The more he thought over it, the more it puzzled him. And how could he broach the matter of Tchigorsky without betraying Marion?

Ralph Ravenspur was in his room smoking and gazing into space. As Geoffrey entered he motioned him into a chair. He seemed to be expected.

"Well?" Ralph said. "You have something to say to me. You look surprised; but know more than you imagine. So Tchigorsky is in danger, eh? Well, he has been in danger ever since he and I took this black business on. We are all in danger for that matter. Marion does not know what to do."

"Uncle, you know there is some tie between Marion and Mrs. May?"

"Certainly I do. It is the crux of the situation. And Marion is to be our dea ex machina, the innocent goddess in the car to solve the mystery. But I am not going to tell you what that relationship is."

"Marion hates and loathes the woman, and fears her."

"Fears her! That is a mild way of putting it. Never mind how, I know what Marion was talking to you about on the terrace. Suffice it that I do know. So last night's danger was not ours, but Tchigorsky's."

"So Marion said, uncle."

"Well, she was right. Tell her that Tchigorsky is profoundly impressed and that he is going away. Tchigorsky is never going to be seen at Ravenspur Castle any more. Are you, Tchigorsky?"

At the question the inner door opened and a figure stepped out. It was one of the natives that Geoffrey had seen in the hollow of the cliffs that eventful day. He could have sworn to the man anywhere—his stealthy glance, his shifty eye, his base humility.

"Tchigorsky has disappeared?" Ralph demanded.

The man bowed low, then he raised his head and to Geoffrey's vast surprise, gravely and solemnly winked at him.

"Never mind," he said. "How's this for a disguise, Master Geoffrey?"

It was Tchigorsky himself.

Chapter XXIV

Marion's Double.

Geoffrey was lying perdu among the gorse on the cliff uplands. He had a field-glass and a rook rifle by his side, for he was waiting for a rabbit. Also he had stolen out here to think over the many matters that puzzled him.

He was slightly disturbed, and, on the whole, not altogether well pleased. Why had his uncle and the mysterious Tchigorsky taken him so far into their confidence and then failed him at the critical moment? He was prepared to take his share of the danger; indeed he had already done so, and had proved his steel.

And was not Marion equally mysterious? True, he might have got more out of her, but had refrained from motives of delicacy. Perhaps, after all, his elders knew best. A word slipped, a suspicious glance, might spoil everything.

Then Geoffrey looked up suddenly. Some two hundred yards away he saw a rabbit lopping along in his direction. At the same instant two figures came along the cliff. They were ladies, and the sight of them astonished Geoffrey, for it was not usual to see anything more modern than a shepherd or a dog at this wild spot.

The figures paused. They were picked out clear against the sky-line as Geoffrey lay there. He recognised one of them. Surely the tall lady, with the easy, swinging carriage and supple grace, could be none other than Mrs. May?

Geoffrey arranged his glasses. They were powerful binoculars and through them he could see Mrs. May's features quite plainly. He looked through them again, long and earnestly. And her companion was Marion!

Just for an instant Geoffrey doubted the evidence of his senses. He wiped the glasses with his handkerchief and looked through them long and earnestly. No doubt could any longer be entertained.

It was Marion—Marion who had declared that she had never spoken to the woman—Marion, who had hated the sight of her. And here she was, walking along with Mrs. May as if they were something more than friends.

Yes; it was Marion beyond a doubt. She had discarded her white dress for one of blue; her sailor hat was replaced by a red tam-o'-shanter. All the same, it was not possible to mistake the graceful figure. Even without the glasses Geoffrey would have been prepared to swear to her.

He lay low under the bushes. The two were coming in his direction. Geoffrey did not want to listen, but something forced him there—some power he could not resist. Nearer and nearer they came, until Geoffrey could hear Mrs. May's voice.

"That is impossible, my dear Zazel," she said. "But you are safe."

"I am not so sure of that," was the reply. "And I'm only a pawn in the game."

It was Marion's voice; the same, yet not the same, it was a hoarse, strained voice, like the voice of a man who smokes to excess. Certainly Geoffrey was not prepared to swear to those as the tones of Marion.

"Absurd, Zazel. Of course you know that we are all in it together. And look at the glorious reward when our task is over. We must succeed ultimately, there is no doubt about that, in spite of Tchigorsky. It is only a question of time. Am I to believe that you are not going to be true to your oath?"

"I shall not forget my oath. Can the leopard change its spots? But I am getting so tired of it all. I should like to end it at one swoop. If you can do that—"

"I have just shown you how it is possible."

"There is sense in that suggestion. And it is so artistic. It would be quoted in the scientific papers, and various ingenious theories would be put forth. But some might escape."

"One or two perhaps at the outside. Let them. Nobody would suspect us over that. And I have the bees safely in my possession."

Geoffrey heard no more. The figures passed by him and then re-passed in the direction whence they came.

No sooner were they out of sight than Geoffrey rose to his feet. He felt that he must ascertain at once whether that girl was Marion or not. The face was hers, the figure hers, but that voice—never!

Then he paused. He came over the knoll of the irregular cliff and there strolling towards him in her white dress and straw hat was Marion. She was gathering gorse, and did not see him until he was close upon her. The pause gave Geoffrey time to recover from his absolute amazement.

So that creature had not been Marion after all. A deep sigh of thankfulness rose to his lips. The sense of relief was almost painful.

By the time that Marion became conscious of his presence he had recovered his presence of mind. Marion plainly could know nothing about her double, and he was not going to tell her.

"I heard you were here, Geoff," she said. "Jessop told me so just now. Are you going home?"

Geoffrey nodded. He had no words for the present. "It is so lovely," Marion went on, "I am quite proud of my courage in coming alone. Do you see anything else here?"

"Nothing but rabbits," Geoffrey replied, "and few of them to-day. You are the only human being I have seen since I started."

Then they walked home chattering gaily together. Geoffrey felt his suspicions falling away from him one by one; indeed, he was feeling somewhat ashamed of himself. To doubt Marion on any ground was ridiculous; to doubt the evidence of his own senses was more absurd still. Thank God he had met Marion.

All the same, there were things to tell Ralph Ravenspur. He, at any rate, must know all that had been heard that morning. Ralph was seated in his room with his everlasting pipe in his mouth, much as if he had not moved since breakfast.

"I have news for you, uncle," Geoffrey said, as he entered the room.

"Of course you have, my boy. I knew that directly I heard your step on the stair. I hope you have stumbled on something of importance."

"Well, that is for you to say. I saw Mrs. May. She came quite close to me on the cliffs. She had a companion. When I looked through my glasses I saw it was Marion."

"Not our Marion," he said. "Not our dear little girl."

"Of course not. Singular that you should have our love of and faith in Marion when you have never seen her. I had my glasses and I could have sworn it was Marion. Then they came close enough for me to hear them speak, and I knew that I was mistaken. It was not Marion's voice. Besides, I met the real Marion a few minutes later dressed in her white dress and hat."

"So that is settled. What did the other girl wear?"

"A loose, blue dress—a serge, I should say."

"And her hat?"

"A Scottish thing—what they call a tam-o'-shanter."

"So that acquits our Marion. She couldn't be in two places at once; she couldn't even wear two dresses at the same time. And our Marion's voice is the music of the sphere—the sweetest in the whole world. But the face was the same."

"The likeness was paralysing. What do you make of it, uncle?"

Ralph smiled drily.

"I make a good deal of it," he replied. "Let us not jump to conclusions, however. Did you hear anything they were saying?"

"Of course I did. Mrs. May was urging her companion to do something. She was pointing out how rich the reward would be. It was something, I fancy, that had a deal to do with us."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Ralph said grimly. "Go on."

"Something artistic that would be commented on in the scientific papers, a thing that would not lead to suspicion."

"Yes, yes. Did you manage to get a clue to what it was?"

"I'm afraid not. Mrs. May made one remark that was an enigma to me. She said that she had the bees safely in her possession."

A queer sound came from Ralph's lips; his face glared with a strange light.

"You have done well," he said. "Oh, you have done well indeed."

And for the time not another word would he utter.

Chapter XXV

Geoffrey is Puzzled.

It was a long time before Ralph Ravenspur spoke again. He remained so quiet that Geoffrey began to imagine that his existence had been forgotten. He ventured to lay a hand on his uncle's knee.

The latter started like one who sleeps uneasily under the weight of a haunting fear.

"Oh, of course," he said. "I had forgotten you; I had forgotten everything. And yet you brought me news of the greatest importance."

“Indeed, uncle. What was it?”

“That you shall know speedily. The danger had not occurred to me for the moment. And yet all the time it has been under my nose.”

“Still, you might easily be forgiven for not seeing—”

“Seeing has nothing to do with it. And there is nothing the matter with my hearing. The danger has been humming in my ears for days, and I never heard it. Now it is roaring like Niagara. But please God, we shall avert the danger.”

“You might take me into your confidence in this matter, uncle.”

“That I shall before a day has passed, but not for the moment. We are face to face now with the most dangerous crisis that has yet occurred. The enemy can strike us down one by one, and nobody shall dream that there is anything beyond a series of painfully sudden deaths. Failure of the heart’s action the doctors would call it. That is all.”

At that moment Tchigorsky returned to the room. No longer was he in the disguise of an Indian. Perhaps he had donned it to surprise Geoffrey; perhaps he was just discarding the disguise after putting it to some practical use. To him Ralph repeated all that Geoffrey had said.

He followed with the most rapt and most careful attention.

“Danger, indeed.” he said gravely; “the danger that moves unseen on the air, and strikes from out of nothingness. I prophesied something like this, Ralph.”

“Aye, my friend,” Ralph replied, “you did. But not quite the same way.”

“Because I did not know that fortune had placed the medium so close at hand. Where are the bees?”

Geoffrey was listening intently. Up to now he had failed to understand why his story had moved Ralph so profoundly. And what could the bees have to do with it? Yet Mrs. May had mentioned bees.

“They are in two hives outside the morning-room window,” said Ralph. “The bees are Vera’s pets, and they thrive for the most part along the flower borders of the terrace. They are ordinary bees.”

“In the ordinary bar-frame hives, of course?”

“Oh, yes; they are quite up to date. You can see the insects working, and all that kind of thing. The hives can be moved.”

“I suppose they are a nuisance occasionally?” Tchigorsky asked.

“Yes,” Geoffrey smiled. “We have all been stung now and again.”

Tchigorsky appeared to be satisfied at that head. He smoked a whole cigarette while he revolved a plan in his mind.

“It is necessary to get the whole family out of the way for a time,” he said slowly. “It will be necessary to do so without delay. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the mischief has already been done. Ralph, can you induce your father and the whole family to go away for a time—say till after dark?”

“Perhaps,” Ralph replied. “But not without explaining, and it is impossible to do that. But Geoffrey might manage it. Unless he does so, one or more of us will pay the penalty before daybreak.”

“I will do anything you desire,” Geoffrey cried eagerly.

“Then go to your grandfather and get him to arrange a picnic over to Alton Keep. It is a perfect day, and it will be possible to remain out till dark, returning to a late supper. I know the suggestion sounds absurd—childish in the circumstances—but

it will have to be done. Say that there is a great danger in the castle which has to be removed. Say that nobody is to know anything about it. Go!"

Geoffrey went at once. He found the head of the family in the library trying to interest himself in a book. He looked up as Geoffrey entered, and a slight smile came over his worn face. There were two people in the house who could do anything with him—Geoffrey and Vera.

"You look as if you wanted something." he said.

"I do," Geoffrey replied. "I want you to do me a great favor."

"It is granted—granted on the principle that we make the last hours of the condemned criminal as comfortable as possible."

"Then I want you to get up a picnic to-day."

Rupert Ravenspur dropped his glasses on the table. He wondered if this were some new kind of danger, a mysterious form of insanity, brought about by the common enemy.

"I am perfectly serious," Geoffrey said, with a smile. "Not that it is any laughing matter. Dear grandfather, there is a great danger in the house. I don't know what it is, but Uncle Ralph knows, and he has never been wrong yet. It was he who found out all about those dreadful flowers. And he wants the house cleared till dark. Unless we do so, the morning will assuredly see the end of one or more of us."

"Is it a painless death?" the old man asked grimly. "If it is, I prefer to remain here."

"But there is always hope," Geoffrey pleaded. "And you always think of us. Won't you do this thing? Won't you say that it is a sudden whim of yours? Mind, everybody is to go; everybody but Uncle Ralph. I shall ride, and when I have ridden some distance I shall pretend to have forgotten something. Perhaps you deem me unduly foolish. But I implore you to do this thing."

Rupert Ravenspur hesitated no longer. He always found it hard to resist that young, smiling, handsome face. Not that he was blind to the folly of the proceedings. On his own initiative he would as soon have danced a hornpipe in the hall.

"I will go and see about it at once," he said.

He had put off his sombre air, and assumed a kind of ill-fitting gaiety. Gordon Ravenspur and his wife received the suggestion with becoming resignation. To them it was the first signs of a mind breaking down under an intolerable strain. Vera and Marion professed themselves to be delighted.

"It sounds odd," said the latter. "Fancy the doomed and fated Ravenspurs going on a picnic! And fancy the suggestion, too, coming from grandfather!"

Vera looked anxious.

"You don't imagine," she said, "that his mind—"

"Oh, his mind is all right. You can see that from his face. But I expect that the strain is telling on him, and that he wants to get out of himself for a time. Personally, I regard the idea as charming."

The preparations were made, no great matter in so large and well-regulated an establishment as Ravenspur Castle. If the servants were astonished, they said nothing. The stolid coachman sat solemnly on the box of the waggonette; the

demure footman touched his hat as he put up the step with the air of a man who is accustomed to do this sort of thing every day.

Geoffrey stood under the big portico and waved his hand.

"You should drive with us," Marion cried.

"And you will not be long?" Vera asked.

"Oh, I am duly impressed with the importance of the occasion," Geoffrey laughed. "My horse will get there almost as soon as you arrive. Call the spaniel."

Tut, the pet spaniel, was called, but no response was made, and finally the party drove off without him. Geoffrey watched the waggonette with a strange sense of unreality upon him. He felt that he could have scoffed at a situation like this in the pages of a novel. And yet it is the truth that is always so improbable.

Our most solemn and most trivial thoughts always run along the grooves of the mind together, and as Geoffrey passed round the house he caught himself wondering where the dog was. He whistled again and again. It was a most unusual thing for Tut to be far from the family. Outside the morning-room window the dog lay as if fast asleep.

"Get up, you lazy beast," Geoffrey cried; "after them, sir."

But the dog did not move; he made no sign as Geoffrey cuffed him with the side of his foot. The dog was dead. He lay still and placid; there was no sign of pain. There was nothing about the carcase to suggest poison. Close by the bees were busy among the flowers. In the hives there seemed to be more noise than usual. Geoffrey opened the windows of the morning room, leaving the casement flung back behind him. A long claw was put forth to shut it.

"The window must he kept shut," Ralph Ravenspur said quietly. "In fact, I have given orders that every window in the house is to be closed. Why, you will see presently. Did you notice anything as you came along?"

"I was too excited," Geoffrey replied. "I have just found poor Tut outside. The dog has died suddenly. Half an hour ago he was perfectly well, young, full of life and vigor. And now he is dead."

"Lies just outside the window, doesn't he?" Ralph asked.

He seemed to speak callously. A man who had passed through his experiences and emotions was not likely to feel for the loss of a dog. And yet there was intense curiosity in his tone.

"Just outside; close to the hives."

"Ah, yes. He was poisoned, you think?"

"I expect so. And yet where could he get the poison? Nobody comes here. Perhaps it was not poison after all."

A thin smile flickered on Ralph's face.

"Yes, it was," he said; "the dog was poisoned by a bee sting."

Chapter XXVI

Geoffrey Begins to Understand.

Geoffrey had no words for a time. Slowly the hideousness of the plot was beginning to beat in upon him. Mrs. May had mentioned bees to her mysterious companion, who had so remarkable a likeness to Marion, and by a strange chance Ralph Ravenspur had the same morning at breakfast mentioned a certain Asiatic bee, whose poison and whose honey were fatal to human life.

"Ah," said Geoffrey slowly, "the bees Mrs. May mentioned."

"Precisely, my boy. And the bees that I mentioned also. Tchigorsky found the dog but a minute or two ago. He slipped downstairs with me the minute we heard the waggonette drive away. He was very anxious to see the hives. Directly he caught sight of Tut lying there he knew what had happened. He has gone to my room for something. When he comes back he will have something to show you."

Tchigorsky entered the room a moment later. He had in his hand a small cardboard box with a glass lid. Inside something was buzzing angrily. It was an insect, the wings of which moved so rapidly that they seemed to scream, as a house-fly does when the falces of a spider close upon it.

"Have a good look at it," Tchigorsky said curtly.

"Is it dangerous?" Geoffrey asked.

"One of the most deadly of winged insects," the Russian said. "It is a black bee from the forests near Lassa. There is a larger variety, whose sting produces the most horrible sufferings and death. This sort injects a poison which stops the action of the heart like prussic acid, but without the rigidity caused by that poison. The Lassa black bee invades other bees' nests and preys on their honey. They frighten the other bees, which make no attempt to drive them out, but go on working as usual. Then gradually the whole hive gets impregnated with that poison, and an ordinary brown bee becomes as dangerous as a black one. This is the bee that killed your dog."

"Then the hives are already impregnated," Geoffrey cried.

"Precisely. Half-a-dozen of these black bees have been introduced into the hives. Now, do you begin to understand the malignity or the plot? Your dog was not dead when, with my net, I caught this fellow—I expected to catch him."

"And ran great risk in doing so."

"Of course. It was a recreation compared with some of the risks I have run."

"You are right there," Ralph said in his deep croaking tones. "Look at the thing, Geoffrey."

With a shudder Geoffrey took the box in his hand. There was nothing formidable about the insect under the glass lid. It had more anger and fury, more 'devil' than the ordinary bee, but it was very little larger, of a deep, lustrous black, with orange eyes and purple, gauzy wings. There was nothing weird about it.

"Was it imported for the purpose?" Geoffrey asked.

"Undoubtedly," Ralph replied. "Imported by the woman who calls herself Mrs. May. Before she came over to England she must have had this house described to her with the greatest minuteness. Otherwise, she could not have so many instruments ready to her hand; she would never have thought of these bees for instance.

"If this scheme had not been discovered everybody in the house would have been stung before long, and every one assuredly would have died. Those black bees are exceedingly fierce, and do not hesitate to attack everybody and

everything. Their sting is so sharp and so minute that it leaves no mark and no pain. Half an hour passes, and then the victim falls down and dies."

Geoffrey regarded the specimen with new interest. He eyed it up and down as if examining a cobra through the glass sides of its prison house. Tchigorsky took the box and flattened the lid down until the insect within was no more than a red smash on the glass. A little later and the thing was pitched over the cliffs into the sea.

"It is a dreadful business," Geoffrey said. "And, indeed, it seems almost hopeless to try to combat foes so ruthless, so resourceful, and so daring as ours. No sooner are we out of one horror than we are into another."

"While life lasts there is always hope," said Tchigorsky.

"That's true," said Geoffrey, more cheerfully. "At any rate we can avert the danger now. But how are we going to get rid of those things?"

"We are going to catch them," said Tchigorsky grimly. "We shall have to destroy all the other bees, I am afraid, and we shall be compelled to let Miss Vera draw her own conclusions as to the cause of the mischief."

"And the honey, Mr. Tchigorsky?"

"Oh, the honey will be all right. That hasn't been stung, you know. I have tasted honey from a nest which the black bees have invaded, and have been none the worse for it. We had better surmise that for some inscrutable reason the bees have deserted their quarters. And we shall propose to know nothing at all about the matter. I flatter myself we shall puzzle the enemy as completely as our friends."

The matter was discussed in all its bearings until the light began to fail and the glow faded gradually from out of the shy.

Then after locking the inner door of the morning-room, Ralph produced two large gauze frames, some matches, and powdered sulphur. This, with a small bellows, completed the stock in trade.

Tchigorsky immediately set about his task in a workmanlike manner. The bees were all in the two hives by this time. Over the hole in front of each a square of muslin was fastened; a pile of sulphur in front was lighted, and the fumes were gently wafted in to the hole with the aid of the pair of miniature bellows.

There was an angry murmur from within, the murmur of droning insects, then the quick scream of churning wings. The little strip of muslin was strained by alarmed and infuriated bees striving to escape. But not for long. Gradually the noise died down, and Tchigorsky signed to Geoffrey to help him carry the hive into the house.

There it was deposited on a table and the top lifted off. Instantly the gauze frame was placed over it, and with a brush, Tchigorsky swept out the stagnant insects into a glass-topped box provided for the purpose. On the whole, there was not much danger, but it was just as well to be on the safe side "Not one left," said Tchigorsky, after he had made a careful investigation. "But it's quite as well to be certain. I've put those insects into the box, but I don't fancy any of them will revive. Now for the other one."

The other hive was treated in similar fashion. There was no hitch, and finally the frame was replaced as it nothing had happened, with the exception that the tiny occupants were no more. In the glass boxes, among the piles of dead bodies, Geoffrey could see here and there the form of a black insect. From his coat pocket

Tchigorsky produced some long, thin strips of lead, which he proceeded to wind round the boxes containing the bees.

"There," he exclaimed, "that job is done at last, and a nasty one it has been. To prevent any further mischief I'll just step across the terrace and throw these over into the sea." He moved off into the darkness, and as he did so there came the sound of a fresh, young voice that startled Geoffrey and Ralph as if they had been criminals caught red-handed in some crime.

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey, where are you?" the voice cried.

Ralph stepped across and closed the window as Vera entered. It was quite dark outside, and Ralph hoped that Tchigorsky would see without being seen. Vera flashed a look of gentle reproach at her lover.

"How can you look me in the face after the way in which you have treated me?" she asked. "This is the first day's pleasure we have had for years, and you—"

"Did not care to leave Uncle Ralph," Geoffrey said. "He seemed so lonely that I felt I could not let him remain like this."

"Geoffrey is a good fellow," Ralph muttered.

Vera bent and kissed Geoffrey fondly. She smiled without any show of anger.

"I forgive him," she said. "Still, I did miss him. Where are you going, dear?"

"Across the terrace," Geoffrey replied. "I'll be in to supper directly. It's all ready, and there is Marion calling you. I'm coming."

Tchigorsky had crept to the window. He caught Geoffrey's eye and waved to him vigorously. It was a sign that he wanted assistance at once.

Chapter XXVII

An Unexpected Guest.

Geoffrey gave one glance at Ralph before he went. The latter nodded slightly and sharply, much as if he saw the look and perfectly comprehended it. Vera had disappeared at Marion's call. In the dining-room beyond the servants were getting supper. From the distance came the pop of a cork.

Outside it was dark by this time. Geoffrey closed the window. He did not speak, but waited for Tchigorsky to give the sign. His feet touched something that gave out a faint metallic twang.

Geoffrey wondered. Did this mean burglars? He was certainly near to a wire which was stretched across the terrace, close to the ground. It was precisely the precaution taken by modern burglars to baffle capture in case of being disturbed during their predatory proceedings.

But burglars would not come to Ravenspur. A minute's reflection convinced Geoffrey of that. The name and horror of the house were known all over England. Everybody knew of the watch and ward kept there, and no burglar in his senses would risk what amounted to almost certain capture.

No; something far different was going on. And that something had been sprung hastily, for half an hour before these wires had not been there. Geoffrey waited with the comfortable assurance that Tchigorsky was not far off.

A stealthy footstep crept towards him; a shadow crossed the gloom.

"Is that you, Tchigorsky?" Geoffrey whispered.

"Yes," came the reply. "There are hawks about. Listen."

A little way down the terrace something was moving. Geoffrey could hear what sounded to him like labored breathing, followed by a stifled cry of pain.

"The one hawk is wounded, and the other has sheered off," said Tchigorsky.

"It sounds like a woman," said Geoffrey.

"It is a woman, my dear boy. And such a woman! Beautiful as the angels, fair as a summer's night. Clever! No words can paint her talents. And she is in the toils. She cries, but nobody heeds."

Again came the cry of pain. There was a flash and a spurt of flame as Tchigorsky struck a match and proceeded to light a lantern. He picked his way over the entanglement of wires; Geoffrey followed him.

"Who laid this labyrinth?" Geoffrey asked.

"Oh, a good and true assistant of ours, an old servant of your uncle's. We have more than one assistant, and Elphick is invaluable. We laid the trap for the bird, and she has broken her wing in it. Pity she had not broken her neck."

Geoffrey did not echo the last ferocious sentiment. He was aflame with curiosity. A little farther off in the dim path shown by the lantern's flare something dark lay huddled on the ground. There was a flash of white here and there, the shimmer and rustle of silken garments.

It might have been Geoffrey's fancy, but he seemed to hear a hurried whisper of voices, and saw something rise from the ground and hurry away. But the black and white heap remained. Tchigorsky flashed his lantern upon it. Geoffrey could just see that there was a strange, malignant grin upon his face.

"A lady!" he cried in affected astonishment. "Ravenspur, here is a lady! Madam, permit me to tender you our assistance. You are in pain."

A white, defiant face looked up—a beautiful face disfigured for the moment by evil passions. There was murder in the eyes. The woman seemed to have no consciousness of any one but Tchigorsky.

"It is you!" she hissed. "Toujours Tchigorsky."

"Yes, it is I. But I have unfortunately forgotten your name. Strange that one should do so in the case of one so lovely and distinguished. You are—"

"Mrs. May. Mrs. Mona May."

She had caught sight of Geoffrey now and a smile came, forced to her lips.

"Mrs. Mona May," said Tchigorsky. He spoke in the same slightly mocking strain. "Mrs. Mona May. How stupid of me to forget. And yet in my muddled brain the name was so different."

Geoffrey bent over the woman anxiously.

"You are in pain," he said. "May I assist you?"

"Indeed, it is very kind of you, Mr. Ravenspur," Mrs. May replied. "I tripped over something. I have hurt my ankle."

"Barbed wire," said Tchigorsky. "Laid down to trap—er—burglars."

"But on no other occasion—"

Mrs. May paused and bit her lips.

Tchigorsky smiled. He understood what she was going to say. On no other occasion when she had been here had she encountered a similar obstacle.

Geoffrey was frankly puzzled.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "When the gates are closed—"

"But they were not closed an hour ago, when I slipped into the yard." was the reply. "I am ashamed to say that I allowed sheer vulgar curiosity to get the better of me, and now I am properly punished for my error of taste."

"Nothing but curiosity," Tchigorsky murmured. "My dear Ravenspur, you may dismiss any unworthy suspicions from your mind. The glamor of your name and the fatal romance that clings to your race have proved too much for the most charming and most tender-hearted of her sex."

"I have no suspicions at all," said Geoffrey.

"Of course not," Tchigorsky said in the same mocking way. The light yet keen sarcasm was lost on Geoffrey, but the other listener understood. "Mrs. May would not injure a living creature—not a fly or a bee."

The white face flashed again. By this time the woman was on her feet. One foot she found it almost impossible to put to the ground.

"Get a conveyance and take me home," she moaned.

"Perish the thought," Tchigorsky cried. "Would the Ravenspurs outrage the sacred name of hospitality like that? Circumstances compel the life of the cloister and the recluse, but there are limits. Suspicious as the family must be, I am sure they would not fear an unfortunate lady with a sprained ankle."

"Of course not," Geoffrey observed. "I will go and prepare them."

He had read that suggestion in Tchigorsky's eyes. Heedless of Mrs. May's protests, he had vanished towards the house. Tchigorsky had stooped and taken the woman in his arms as if she had been a child.

"What a precious burden!" he said. "Scarred and battered old Tchigorsky is a fortunate man, madam. There, you need not struggle; your little, fluttering heart has no occasion to beat like that. I am not going to throw you over the cliffs."

The last few words were uttered in tones of smothered ferocity.

"You are a devil," the woman muttered.

"Aye, you are right there. Never was the devil stronger in my heart than he is at this moment. Never was I more tempted to pitch you over the terrace into the sea. But there is worse than that waiting for you."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I am going to carry you into the house; I am going to introduce you formally to the family to Ravenspur. I am doing you a kindness. Think how useful the information afforded you will be later!"

"You are certainly the boldest man in England."

"As you are the most utterly abandoned and unscrupulous woman. I can only die once. But I am not going to die before I see you and your hellspawn all hanged."

"Why don't you denounce me now?"

"Madam, I never did care for unripe fruit. The pear is ripening on the tree, and I will pluck it when the time comes."

Tchigorsky pushed the window of the morning-room open and laid his burden down on a couch.

Almost immediately Rupert Ravenspur, followed by Mrs. Gordon and Geoffrey, came into the room. Ralph was already there. Geoffrey proceeded to explain and make the necessary introduction.

"And who is this gentleman?" Rupert Ravenspur demanded, his eye on Tchigorsky.

"A friend of mine," Ralph put in—"Dr Tchigorsky."

Ravenspur bowed, not that he looked overpleased.

"Permit me to place my hospitality at your disposal," he said. "It is many years since we entertained at Ravenspur, nor do we, in ordinary circumstances, desire them. At present I cannot do less than make you welcome. Madam, I regret that your curiosity should have ended so disastrously."

"I am properly punished," Mrs. May groaned. "My poor foot!"

In the presence of pain and suffering even Ravenspur's displeasure disappeared. Mrs. Gordon proceeded to cut away the high French boot and bathe the small foot in warm water. Almost immediately Mrs. May declared the pain to have passed away. There were tears in her eyes—tears that moved some of the onlookers.

"I am sure I don't deserve this," she said. "I have behaved so abominably that I really don't know what to say."

"Say nothing," Mrs. Gordon replied simply and gently, "but come in to supper. I understand that you are staying at Jessop's farm. A message shall be sent them that you will not return till morning. Meanwhile, if you will lean on me we will manage to reach the dining-room."

The procession started. In the doorway stood Vera. She came forward with a speech of condolence. Tchigorsky was watching the pair. There was a hard gleam in his eyes; the clenching of his hand as over the hilt of a dagger. Beyond, with a face white as her dress, stood Marion.

She staggered against the table as she saw Mrs. May. Her face was full of terror. Geoffrey wondered what it all meant. And was this the wildest comedy or the direst tragedy that was working out before his eyes?

Chapter XXVIII

More of the Bees.

Of the real, palpitating horror of the situation only three people round the table knew the true inwardness. They were Tchigorsky and Ralph and Mrs. May. Geoffrey guessed much, and probably Marion could have said a deal had she cared to. Her face was smiling again, but the uneasy, haunted look never left her eyes. And all through the elaborate, daintily-served meal Mrs. May never glanced at the girl once.

And yet, here under the Ravenspur roof, partaking of the family hospitality, was the evil itself. Ralph smiled to himself grimly as he wondered what his father would say if he knew the truth.

Once or twice as he spoke, Mrs. May glanced at him curiously. She was herself now; she might have been an honored guest at that table for years.

"Your face is oddly familiar to me," she said.

"I regret I cannot say the same," Ralph replied. "I am blind."

"But you have not always been blind."

"No. But my misfortune dates back for a number of years. It is a matter that I do not care to discuss with anybody."

But Mrs. May was not to be baffled. She had an odd feeling that this man and herself had met before. The face was the same, and yet not the same.

"Were you ever in Thibet?" she asked.

"I had a brother who once went there," Ralph replied. "I am accounted like him. It is possible you may have met my brother, madam."

The speech was sullen, delivered with a stupid air that impressed Mrs. May that she had nothing to fear from him. And yet the words had a curious effect on her. Her face changed color and for the first time she glanced at Marion. The girl was trembling; and was ashy grey to her lips. Tchigorsky, observing, smiled.

"Thibet is a wonderful country," he said, "and Lassa a marvellous city. I had some of my strangest experiences there. I and another man, since dead, penetrated all the secrets of the Holy City. It was only by a miracle that I escaped with my life. But these I will carry to my grave."

"Tell me something of your adventures there," she said.

"Some day, perhaps," Tchigorsky replied. "For the most part they were too horrible. I could tell you all about the beasts and birds and insects. I see you have some bees outside, Miss Vera. Did you ever see Thibet bees?"

"Are they different to ours?" Vera asked.

Tchigorsky glanced up. Mrs. May was regarding him with more than a flattering interest. A slight smile, almost a smile of defiance, parted her lips. Marion was looking down at her plate, crumbling a piece of bread absently.

"Some of them," said Tchigorsky. "Some are black, for instance. I have a place in Kent where I dabble in that kind of thing. I have a few of the bees with me."

Tchigorsky took a small box from his pocket and laid it on the table. Vera inspected the black bees for a moment, and then handed them back to Tchigorsky.

By accident or design he let the box fall, the lid flew open, and immediately half-a-dozen sable objects were buzzing in the air.

A yell of terror broke from Mrs. May—a yell that rang to the roof. She jumped to her feet only to sink again with the pain of the injured limb. She seemed to have lost all control of herself; she turned and addressed Tchigorsky in some liquid tongue that conveyed nothing to any one except that she was denouncing the Russian in a fury of passionate anger.

Geoffrey had risen too, greatly alarmed. From the head of the table, Ralph Ravenspur coolly demanded to know what it was all about.

"The man is mad," Mrs. May screamed. "He is a dangerous lunatic. Those are the black bees of Thibet. They are the most fearsome of insects. Ah!"

One of the droning objects dropped on her hand, and she yelled again. She was a picture of abject and pitiable terror.

"I am doomed, doomed," she moaned. "Killed by a careless madman."

"Is there any danger?" Geoffrey demanded.

Only the life led among so many perils caused the family to wait calmly for the next and more dramatic development. Perhaps the only way in which Tchigorsky was behaving gave them confidence. If he were a madman, as Mrs. May asserted, then the madman was wonderfully calm and placid.

"You are alarming yourself unnecessarily," he said. "See here."

He reached over and took the bee from Mrs. May's arm. The insect had become entangled in her sleeve and was buzzing angrily.

"The little creature is furious," he said. "As a matter of fact, they are always more or less furious. If there is any danger there is danger now."

He held the bee lightly in his hand. Then he released it.

"The stings have been removed," he said. "I bred these myself, and I know how to treat them. I am sorry to have caused a disturbance."

He spoke with serious, earnest politeness, but there was a mocking light in his eyes as he turned upon Mrs. May. Nobody had a thought or a glance for anybody else, and the spectacle of Marion lying back half-fainting in her chair passed unnoticed.

"Then they are usually dangerous?" Vera asked.

"My dear young lady, they are dreadful," Tchigorsky explained. "They invade other nests and eat the honey as they might have invaded your hives. By way of experiment I tried one of these on your hives to-night, and your bees seemed to recognise an enemy at once. They all deserted their hives and not one of them has returned. As some amends for what I have done, I am going to send you two of the finest swarms in England."

Vera shuddered.

"I shall never want to see a bee again," she said.

Once more the eyes of Tchigorsky and Mrs. May met. She knew well that Tchigorsky was talking at her through the rest, and that in his own characteristic way he was informing her that the last plot had failed. With a queer smile on her face she proceeded to peel a peach.

"You are so horribly clever," she said, "that I feel half-afraid of you. But I don't suppose we shall meet again."

"Not unless you come to Russia," said Tchigorsky, "whither I start tomorrow. But I am leaving my affairs in competent hands."

Again was the suggestion of a threat; again Mrs. May smiled. The smile was on her face long after the three most interested in the tragedy had left the dining-hall and gone to the billiard-room for a smoke.

"Are you really leaving us?" Geoffrey asked.

"I want Mrs. May to imagine so," said Tchigorsky. "In a day or two her spies will bring her information that I have left England. As a matter of fact, I have succeeded in tapping a vein of information that has baffled me for a long time. Still, I am not going away, and my disguise will be the one you saw me in. If luck goes well I shall be attached to Mrs. May in the character of a native servant before

long. So if you see any suspicious-looking Asiatic prowling about, don't put a bullet into him, for you may kill me by mistake."

Geoffrey smiled and promised.

"That was a rare fright you gave Mrs. May over the bees," he said. "How did you manage it?"

Tchigorsky smiled as he lighted a cigarette.

"I stole them from the woman's spare supply," he said. "I have been all over her possessions to-day. I almost suffocated the horrible little things and removed their stings. Of course, they will not live many hours. I did it in a spirit of mischief, intending to release them in my lady's own sitting-room. I couldn't resist the temptation to try her nerves to-night."

"You are getting near the truth?" Geoffrey asked.

"Very near it. We want certain evidence to bring the whole gang into the net, and then we shall strike—if they don't murder us first. But—"

The speaker paused as Vera entered the room.

"Where is Mrs. May?" Geoffrey asked.

"She has gone to her room," Vera explained. "'Her foot is so painful that she has decided to accept an invitation to spend the night here."

"Good," Tchigorsky muttered, "it could not have been better."

Chapter XXIX

Mrs. May at Ravenspur.

The woman known as Mrs. Mona May had lost no time in adapting herself to circumstances. That she had found her way on to the terrace for no good purpose was known to three people, although in all probability she imagined that Tchigorsky alone was acquainted with her designs.

He had laid a trap for her, and to a certain extent he had forced her hand. But she was too brilliant and unscrupulous a woman not to be able to turn misfortune to her own advantage. And was she not here—here a guest among those who for some reason she hated from her soul.

Why, it matters not for the present. From Mrs. May's point of view, Tchigorsky alone knew, and Tchigorsky was going away ere long. But whether Tchigorsky remained or not, Mrs. Mona May could defy him to prove that she was in any way connected with the misfortunes of the Ravenspurs.

Once the man she had most reason to dread had withdrawn to the billiard room, the adventuress lost no time in ingratiating herself with her involuntary hosts.

This was the woman with whom Geoffrey had dined. Vera regarded her curiously. She was very beautiful and fascinating. She had a manner that attracted. Her conversation was bright and interesting.

"You must not mind me," she said to Vera. "And you must not grudge me a little of your lover's company."

Vera blushed divinely.

"How did you guess that?" she asked.

"Oh, there are signs, my dear. I have had my own romance and I know. But women of my age can never really rival young girls like yourself. We lack the one great charm."

"I should not have thought so," said Vera.

Mrs. May patted the girl playfully on the cheek.

"That is a very pretty compliment," she replied. "But it does not alter facts. A woman of forty may be fascinating. She has the brilliant parts. But, alas! it is only once that she can possess youth."

The speaker turned away with a gentle sigh and began to discuss the art treasures in the drawing-room with Mrs. Gordon. All the time Marion had held coldly aloof from the stranger.

"You are not like yourself tonight," Vera murmured.

Marion's dark eyes were lifted. There were purple rings under those eyes and a hunted expression on the white face. It was the face of one who has seen a terror that it is impossible to forget.

"Am I not?" she said indifferently. "Perhaps so."

"Don't you like that woman?" Vera asked.

"Frankly, I don't," Marion admitted. "But there are reasons. Strange that you don't recognise the likeness between us. Geoffrey did at once."

Vera started. Strange, indeed, that she had not noticed it before. And now that Marion had spoken, the likeness was surprising. Making allowance for the disparity of years, the two faces were the same.

"Is there another mystery?" Vera asked.

Marion smiled her old self.

"Indeed there is," she confessed. "But it is a poor, vulgar little thing beside your family mystery. Mrs. May is a connection of mine. As a matter of fact, she is closely related to my mother's family. She is not a good woman, and I hope you will see as little of her as possible."

"But I suppose she came to see you?"

"Oh, dear no. She would never have done that. She knows perfectly well that I should strongly oppose her coming here. Beyond question, her taking up her residence for the benefit of her health in this village was simply a coincidence."

Vera looked closely at the visitor.

"Mrs. May doesn't look like a invalid," she said.

"She doesn't. It is her heart. Any sudden excitement might be fatal to her. Is it not strange that I have the seeds of the same complaint?"

"You, Marion. I never heard that before. And you are here!"

"Oh, yes. I am here. A bad place for heart troubles, you would say. But I am young and strong. I merely made the remark—perhaps it would have been better had I not said anything about it."

Mrs. May was talking. She protested gently against the trouble she was causing. Indeed, there was no reason why she should not have gone back to her farm. Still, her kind friends were so very pressing she would stay the night. But she must be up and away early in the morning. She had pressing business, tiresome law business, to see to in York.

“And now I am not going to keep you up any longer,” she said with a brilliant smile. “Who will help me upstairs? Will you, dear?”

She had risen to her feet and approached Marion. The girl seemed to shrink back; it looked as if she were being dragged into some painful undertaking. Then the natural sweetness of her disposition conquered her dislike.

“If you think I can manage it,” she said.

Mrs. May hobbled upstairs, leaning on Marion’s shoulder, chatting gaily. The latter helped her into the room set apart for the involuntary guest, and at a sign closed the door. All her smiles and pretty feminine blandishments vanished; her eyes were dark and hard; her manner was cold and stinging.

“You fool,” hissed Mrs. May. “This is a nice thing you have done!”

“What have I done?” she asked.

“Fallen in love with Geoffrey Ravenspur.”

The words came like a blow. Marion staggered under them.

“I deny it,” she said weakly. “It is false.”

“It is true, you idiot. You are blushing like a rose. And to-night, when that fiend Tchigorsky played that fool’s trick upon us you had no eyes for anyone but Geoffrey. Frightened as I was, I could see that. Your looks betrayed you. What are you going to do about it?”

Marion shook her head sadly. Never had any one at Ravenspur ever seen her look so forlorn and dejected as she did at this moment.

“I don’t know,” she said hopelessly. “I know what I ought to do. I ought to kill you and throw myself into the sea afterwards. Why should I go on leading my present life? Why should I shield you? What are you? What are you to me?”

“You dare ask me that question?”

“Oh, I dare anything in my present mood. Still, I am in your power. You have only to say the word, and it is done.”

“Then why do you take every means of thwarting me?”

Marion rose and crossed over to the door. Her eyes were shining. There was a certain restless motion of her hands.

“Take care,” she whispered. “Don’t drive me too far. Oh, if I could only live the last four years of my life over again!”

Chapter XXX

A Leaf from the Past.

Ralph Ravenspur, with Tchigorsky and Geoffrey, sat smoking in the billiard-room until Vera came in to say good-night and drive them of to bed. As they were about to separate at the head of the stairs Ralph gave them a sign to follow him.

“Come to my room for half an hour,” he said.

The others complied. Tchigorsky slipped away for a while, and on his return he laid the end of a long silk thread on the white table-cover.

“Part of a little scheme,” he said. “This is one end of a long silk thread. Where the other end is matters nothing for the present. Ralph, everybody has retired?”

“Everybody,” Ralph replied, as he filled his pipe.

“I fancy you said that no servants sleep in the house.”

“They have not done so for a long time,” Geoffrey explained. “Not that we entertain the least suspicion of any of them. We merely made the change for safety’s sake.”

Tchigorsky nodded his approval. He arranged the silk thread neatly on the table, coiling the end round a daisy pattern worked into the damask cloth.

“For Mrs. May’s benefit?” Geoffrey asked.

“Precisely,” Tchigorsky said gravely. “I take a great interest in her.”

“By the way,” he exclaimed, “who and what is Mrs. May?”

“The devil fairly disguised,” Ralph croaked. “A beautiful Mephistopheles, a fascinating Beelzebub, a dark-eyed fiend, a—a—”

He pulled up choking with all-consuming rage. His arm was sawing the air as if feeling for the white throat of his lovely foe.

“Steady there,” Tchigorsky muttered. “Steady, Ralph, my friend. Shall we enlighten Master Geoffrey a little as to the kind of woman she is?”

“If you like,” he said. “Only the tale shall be yours. When I come to think of it, I go out of my mind, as I did that night in the Black Valley. Tell him, Tchigorsky; tell him by all means—but not all.”

“Aye, aye; I shall know where to leave off. I’ll sit here where I can watch that table. I am interested in that silk thread. So long as it remains simply coiled up there I can go on talking. When it moves—”

“You are wasting time,” Geoffrey suggested.

“True. But to make amends I am going to interest you from the outset. Doubtless you are curious to know the meaning of those scars on my face and on the face of your uncle. Lately he has managed artistically to disguise his for reasons that will appear later. There was nothing to gain by hiding mine, and pretty ugly they are.

“These scars were branded on us both at the same time by the priests of the great temple in the hills beyond Lassa. Three of us had penetrated there, but the other one knew nothing of the mysteries of Buddha, for the simple reason that he was the servant of your uncle—one Elphick by name. Elphick is doing good work for us elsewhere, but you shall see him in time.

“Now these two men, who had disguised themselves as Buddhist priests and had penetrated all the mysteries of that most mysterious creed, had made a boast two years before at Lahore of what they meant to do. And the words of their vaporings were carried to the ears of a woman who was a Brahmin, though it appeared as if she had abandoned her religion and had married an Englishman.

“This Englishman had been to Lassa himself and, when a girl, his wife had fallen in love with him and he married her. There was a good deal of scandal about it at the time, but there are so many scandals in India that this one was quickly hurled under a layer of other slanders. Some said that that officer had managed to pick up some of the holiest mysteries of Buddha, and that the lovely native had married him to close his lips. Certainly he would never speak of Lassa, and when the place was mentioned he always showed signs of agitation.

“Well, we went. We were not afraid. Both of us knew the East; we spoke many languages; we could assume any disguise. And in a short time, as honored pilgrims from a far land, we were free of the holy temple in the hills beyond Lassa. Soon we were picking up all the mysteries.”

“Are there any mysteries?” Geoffrey asked.

Ralph gave a quick, barking laugh like the snap of a pistol-shot. All this time his grave, wooden smile never relaxed.

“Aye,” Tchigorsky went on, “mysteries! The things we saw and the things we learnt would have driven many a strong man mad. Occult sciences! What do we know of them? I tell you the greatest man who walks the earth, a whole regiment of the finest scientists in Europe, would be a set of chattering monkeys alongside a Buddhist priest. We have seen the dead rise from their graves and heard them speak. We came near to learn the secret of eternal life. And yet everlasting life and the unveiling of the future would not tempt me there again.”

Tchigorsky’s voice had fallen to a harsh whisper. As Geoffrey glanced at Ralph he saw that the latter’s face was bathed in a profound perspiration.

“We were thus situated for some months,” Tchigorsky resumed. “Gradually every mystery connected with life and death was opening up before us, and the secret of universal knowledge was within our grasp. Then one day there was a commotion in the city, and we found that there was to be a great feast in honor of a princess of the royal blood who had come back to Lassa after a long pilgrimage. We were bidden to that feast and had places of honor near to the seat of the princess.

“She came in presently, gorgeously attired in flowing robes and strings of diamonds and emeralds in her hair. She was a magnificent creature. I have seen many a native queen on her throne, but none to compare with that woman who sat flashing her lovely eyes round the table.

“As I looked at her again and again I had an odd feeling that I had seen her before. I turned to speak to Ralph and beheld with distended eyes and dropped jaw that he was regarding the princess.

“What is it?” I asked. “Do you know her, too?”

“Ralph whispered a few words in my ear—a few pungent words that turned me cold. And what he saw was this. In the princess we had the woman from Lahore—the woman who had forsaken her tribe to marry an English officer. We had heard before that she was in the habit of going away for long periods, and we knew that her husband must have possessed himself of Buddhist secrets, perhaps sacred Buddhist script, or that woman would never have been allowed to come and go like this.

“Had she married an Englishman in the ordinary way and subsequently returned to Lassa, she would have been torn to pieces. She had been granted absolution on purpose to wrest those secrets from the Englishman who had stolen them. And we two had boasted in the hearing of this woman that we were going to learn those secrets for ourselves.

“Would she recognise us? That was the question. Remember that we were most carefully disguised, we spoke the language without a flaw, we had the same tale to tell—a tale that we had rehearsed over and over again. There was no reason why we should not pass muster.

“Hope began to revive. Then I looked up and caught that woman’s eye, and she smiled. I dream of that smile sometimes at night, and wake up cold and wet and shivering from head to foot. Not that I have more fear than most men, but then I had seen men put to death in Thibet. The tortures of the wheel would be a pleasant recreation alongside of death like that.

“We were recognised. No need to tell us that. Doubtless that woman had followed us step by step, giving us all the latitude we required, and now she had come to teach us the pains and penalties attaching to our office. She favored us with no further glance until the feast had concluded and what passes for music had begun, when she honored both of us with a summons to her side.

“Of course, we went. In the circumstances there was nothing else to do. She made room for us; she smiled dazzlingly upon us. And then, slowly and deliberately, as a cat with a mouse, she began to play with us.

“‘I speak to you thus,’ she said, because there are others who seek for the secrets of the faith. There were two Christian dogs who came up from Lahore. One was called Tchigorsky the other was called Mayton’—(Mayton was your uncle Ralph’s pseudonym, Geoffrey)—and they boasted what they were going to do. They knew the language, they said. And, behold, the one called Tchigorsky was very like you, holy man.’

“It was coming. I bowed gravely as if the comparison was not pleasing to me. A wild yell of hysterical laughter came to my lips, but I managed to suppress that. There were no knives on the table, and I had not dared to use my revolver. Had there been a knife on the table I should have stabbed that woman to the heart and taken the consequences.”

“But your revolver, Tchigorsky,” Geoffrey suggested.

“My dear boy, holy fathers and shining lights of the Buddhist faith do not carry Regulation Army revolvers,” Tchigorsky said grimly. “All I could do was to wait.”

“‘Did you know, those English at Lahore?’ the princess asked.

“I disclaimed the knowledge, saying that at that time I was in Cawnpore. Then being closely questioned, I proceeded to give a detailed history of the movements of myself and my companion for the last year or so. I was lying glibly, and easily, but I had no comfort from the knowledge. It was easy to see that not one word was believed, and that I was walking into the trap.

“‘At Dargi you were,’ said the princess. ‘What are the five points of the temple there?’

“For the life of me I could not tell her. As a matter of fact, I had never been near Dargi in my life. And the question was one that any Buddhist who had been there would have answered offhand.

“‘I have forgotten,’ I answered as calmly as possible. ‘I have a bad memory. I forget all kinds of things.’

“Those dark eyes seemed to look me all through.

“‘You will forget your own name next,’ the princess said.

“‘I’ll remember that,’ I replied. ‘I am Rane el Den, at your service.’

“Then came the reply in excellent English. ‘Your name is Sergius Tchigorsky, and your companion is Ralph James Mayton. I have found you out. I have only to raise my hand and your fate is sealed.’

“It was all over. I said nothing. I asked no pity. Pity! You might as well strive to soften the heart of the wounded tiger that has you down with a handful of nuts. Then I—”

Tchigorsky paused. His eyes were on the table. He pointed to the silken thread that was slowly moving in the direction of the door.

“Hush!” he said softly. “Blow out the light!”

Chapter XXXI

The Silk Thread.

Intensely interested as he was in the story that Tchigorsky had to tell, Geoffrey, nevertheless, watched the slowly moving thread on the table. Gradually and very slowly the silken tag began to draw away from the pattern on the table-cloth, Tchigorsky following it with grim eyes.

“You find it strange?” he asked Geoffrey.

“Strange and thrilling,” Geoffrey replied. “It appeals to the imagination. Some tragedy may be at the other end of that innocent-looking thread.”

“There may be; there would be if I were not here. We are dealing with a foe whose cunning and audacity know no bounds. You see I have been among the foe and know something of their dealings.”

A passionate anger rose up in Geoffrey as he watched the gliding thread.

“Then why not drop upon them?” he cried. “Why not produce your proofs and hand the miscreants over to the police?”

“What good would that do?” Tchigorsky replied. “Could we prove that the foe had had a direct hand in the tragedies of the past? Could we demonstrate to the satisfaction of a jury that Mrs. May and her confederates were responsible for those poisoned flowers or the bees? And if we get them out of the way there are others behind them. No, no; they must be taught a lesson; they must know that we are all-powerful. And they must feel the weight of our hands. Then the painful family scandal—”

“You are going too far,” Ralph interrupted warningly.

Tchigorsky checked himself after a glance at Geoffrey.

“I am not to be told everything,” he said. “Why?”

“Because we dare not,” Ralph murmured. “It is not that we cannot trust you, but because we dare not.”

With this Geoffrey was fain to be content. By this time the thread had left the table, and was lying on the floor.

“The other end is tied to Mrs. May’s door,” Tchigorsky explained. “When that door was cautiously opened, of course the thread moved. Geoffrey you stay here. Ralph, will you go up by the back staircase and get up to the corridor. Wait there.”

“Is there any danger!” Geoffrey whispered.

“Not now,” said Tchigorsky; “but this audacity passes all bounds. That woman had planned to strike a blow at the very moment when she was enjoying the

hospitality of this roof. The boldness of it would have averted all suspicion from her. One of the family mysteriously disappears and is never heard of again. In the morning not one lock or bolt or bar is disturbed. And yet the member of the family is gone. England would have been startled by the news to-morrow."

"You heard all this?" Geoffrey cried.

"Yes," Tchigorsky said quietly. "That disguise I showed you was useful to me. It is going to be more useful still."

"But the danger! It must be averted," Geoffrey whispered.

Already Tchigorsky was leaving the room. The lamp had been extinguished, after taking care to place a a box of matches close beside it. In the darkness Geoffrey waited, tingling to his finger-tips with suppressed excitement.

Meanwhile, Tchigorsky felt his way along in the darkness. He was counting his steps carefully. He reached a certain spot and then stopped. Ralph strolled down the back staircase, and thence down a flagged passage into the hall, where he climbed the stairs.

Light and darkness, it was all the same to him. There was nobody in the house who could find their way about as well as he.

Then he waited for the best part of half an hour. He could hear queer sounds coming from one of the bed rooms, a half-cry in light, feminine tones, a smothered protest, and then the suggestion of a struggle. Yet Ralph never moved towards it; undercover of the darkness he smiled.

Then he heard a door creak and open; he heard footsteps coming along in his direction. The footsteps were stealthy, yet halting; there was the suggestion of the swish of silken drapery. On and on that mysterious figure came until it walked plump into Ralph's arms.

There was a faint cry—a cry strangled in its birth.

"Mrs. May," Ralph said quietly, "I am afraid I startled you."

The woman was gasping for breath, iron-nerved as she was. She stammered out some halting, stumbling explanation. She was suffering from nervous headache; she was subject to that kind of thing, and there was a remedy she always carried in her jacket pocket. And the jacket was in the hall.

"Go back to your room," said Ralph. "I will fetch it for you."

"There is no occasion," the woman replied. "The shock of meeting you has cured me. But what are you doing?"

"Sleeping on the stairs," Ralph said in his dullest, most mechanical way.

"Sleep—sleeping on the stairs! Why?"

"I frequently do it. I suffer from insomnia. The accident that deprived me of my sight injured my reason. This is one of my lucid intervals. For years I slept in the open air; the atmosphere of a bedroom stifles me. So I am here."

"And here you are going to remain all night?"

"Yes. I presume you have no objection."

Mrs. May was silent. Did this man know the terrible position he had placed her in? Was he telling the truth, or was he spying on her? Was he dangerous enough to be removed, or was he the poor creature he represented himself to be?

"You should get your clever friend Tchigorsky to cure you," she said.

"Tchigorsky has gone away. I don't know when I shall see him again."

That was good news at any rate. Mrs. May stooped to artifice. There were reasons why this man should be got out of the way at present. He had brought danger by his stupid eccentricity, but the bold woman was not going to change her plans for that.

"Be guided by me," she said. "Go to your room."

"I am here till the morning," Ralph said doggedly. "Go to yours. We are a lost, doomed race; What does it matter what I do?"

It was useless to combat sullen obstinacy like this. Mrs. May uttered a few clear words in a language that not one in a million would understand—certainly not three people in England. It never occurred to her for a moment that Ralph Ravenspur might be one of the three; but he was.

He listened grimly. No doubt the mysterious words had nothing to do with the matter, but a door in the corridor opened, and Marion emerged, carrying a light in her hand. She came swiftly down the corridor, her long hair streaming behind her. As she saw Ralph she gave a sigh of relief.

"Come quickly to Vera's room," she said. "I want your help."

In her intense excitement she seemed not to notice Mrs. May. The latter stood aside while the other two passed along. She slipped into her own room and closed the door.

"Foiled," she hissed, "and by that poor meaningless idiot. Is it possible that he suspected anything? But no; he is only a fool. If I had only dared, I might have 'removed' him at the same time. On the whole, it was a good thing that Marion did not see me."

Without the least trace of excitement and without hurry, Ralph followed Marion. A light was burning in the room and Vera, still dressed, was lying on the bed. She was fast asleep, but her face was deadly cold and her breathing was faint to nothingness. Ralph's fingers rested on her pulse for a minute.

"How long has she been like this?" Ralph asked.

"I don't know," Marion replied. "I was just dropping asleep when I fancied I heard Vera call out. In this house the mere suggestion sufficed. I crept quietly along and came in here. The room was empty save for Vera, and there was no sign of a struggle. I should have imagined it to be all fancy but for the queer look in Vera's face. When I touched her I found her to be deadly cold. Is—is it dangerous?"

Ralph shook his head.

"Mysterious as ever," he said. "The miscreant is by us, almost in our hands, and yet we cannot touch him. Vera has been rendered insensible by a drug. The effect of it will pass away in time. She will sleep till morning, and you had better remain with her."

"Of course; I should not dream of leaving the poor child alone."

Ralph just touched Marion's cheek.

"You are a good girl—an angel," he murmured. "What we should do without you I cannot say. Stay here and have no fear. I shall not be far away. I am going to sleep for the rest of the night on the floor outside."

"On the floor, my dear uncle?"

"Bah! it is no hardship." said Ralph. "I have had far less comfortable quarters many a time. I am used to it, and like it. And I sleep like a hare. The slightest noise or motion and I am awake instantly."

Marion raised no further protests. This singular individual was in the habit of doing as he pleased, and nothing could turn him from his humor.

He bade Marion good-night and softly closed the door. But he did not lie down at the head of the stairs. On the contrary, he crept quietly down to his room again.

There Tchigorsky and Geoffrey waited him. The lamp was once more lighted. Tchigorsky had a grin on his face.

"Foiled her?" he asked. "I heard you."

"For the present, at any rate," Ralph replied. "That charming woman does me the honor to regard me as a benighted idiot."

Tchigorsky dropped into a chair and rocked to and fro, shaking with noiseless mirth.

Chapter XXXII

More from the Past.

Geoffrey looked from one to the other for explanation.

"Will you not tell me what has happened?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, nothing has happened," Ralph replied. "A little time ago Tchigorsky outlined a bold stroke on the part of the foe. He suggested that it was possible, without removing a single bolt or bar, to spirit away one of the family, who would never be heard of again. Tchigorsky was making no prophecy; he was speaking from knowledge. Well, the attempt has been made, and it has failed."

"Who was the victim, uncle?"

"Your cousin, Vera. Sit down, my boy; if you go plunging about like that you will ruin everything. Did I not tell you that the attempt had been made and had failed? Vera is safe for a long time to come."

Geoffrey dropped into his seat again.

"How did you manage it, uncle?" he asked.

Ralph gave the details. He told the story drily.

"So I not only prevented the dastardly attempt to carry Vera away," he concluded, "but I baffled the foe altogether. There was not the slightest suspicion that I was on the stairs by the merest accident."

"But you say that Marion was with Vera?"

"She was. That nimble wit of hers led her to suspect danger. But Marion could not have averted the tragedy. A slender girl like her could have done nothing against a strong and determined foe. If necessary, she would have been carried off, and they would have killed two birds with one stone."

Geoffrey shuddered. He was sick of the whole business. For a moment he was a prey to utter despair. It seemed hopeless to fight against a foe like this, a foe striking in the dark and almost moving invisibly.

"Some one ought to watch that room," he said.

"It is unnecessary. I am supposed to be sleeping close by. Already the foe has learnt that I slumber with one eye open. Don't be cast down, Geoffrey. Two more of

the enemy are on their way to Yorkshire, and when they are here the mouth of the net is going to close. I pledge you my word that no further harm shall come to anybody. And Tchigorsky will say the same."

"On my head be it," Tchigorsky muttered. He twisted a cigarette dexterously with his long fingers.

"There is nothing to fear," he said; "nothing with ordinary vigilance. The danger will come when the time for defence has passed and it is our turn to attack. Then there will be danger for the three of us here. Shall we go to bed?"

"I could not sleep for a king's ransom," said Geoffrey.

"Then we will chat and smoke awhile," said Tchigorsky. "If you like, I will go on with the history of our adventures in Lassa."

Geoffrey assented eagerly. Tchigorsky proceeded in a whirl of cigarette smoke.

"We knew we were doomed. We could see our fate in those smiling, merciless eyes. That woman had lived among civilised people; she knew Western life: she had passed in society almost for an Englishwoman.

"But she was native at heart; all her feelings were with her people. All the past could not save us. She meant us to die, and die with the most horrible torture under her very own eyes. Her life in India was a masquerade—this was her real existence.

"'You fancy you are the first.' she said. 'Did you ever know a Russian traveller, Voski by name? He was very like you.'

"I recollected the man. I had met him years before, and had discussed this very Lassa trip."

"'Yes,' I said, for it was useless to hold up our disguises any longer. 'What of him?'

"'He came here,' the princess said. 'He learnt some of our secrets. Then it was found out and he had to walk the Black Valley. He died.'

"All this was news to me. So astonished was I that I blurted out the truth. Only a year before, long after Voski was supposed to be dead, I had met him in London. When I mentioned Lassa he changed the subject and refused to continue the conversation. I fancied that he suspected me of chaffing him. Now I know that he had been through the horrors of the Black Valley and—escaped.

"The eyes of the princess blazed when she heard this. She was a wild, devastating fury. It seemed almost impossible to believe that I had seen her in a tea-gown at Simla, chattering society platitudes in a white sahib's bungalow. And I bitterly regretted betraying myself, because I knew that, wherever he was, Voski would be hunted down and killed, as they were seeking to kill me, as they would slay Ralph Ravenspur, only they have not recognised him."

"Hence the changed face and the glasses?" Geoffrey asked.

"You have guessed it," said Ralph. "I did not want to be known. I am only a poor, demented idiot, a fool who cumbers the ground."

"I had betrayed Voski without doing any good to myself," Tchigorsky resumed. "If any harm has come to him, I am his murderer. Presently the princess calmed down, and the old cruel, mocking light came back to her eyes. We were speaking English by this time—a language utterly unknown to the awestruck, open mouthed priests standing near us."

"'Let us pretend that this is my drawing-room in India, and that I am entertaining you at tea,' she said. 'Later you shall know something of me in my real character. I suppose you recognised the risks that you ran?'

"'Perfectly,' I replied. 'We are going to be done to death in barbarous fashion, because we have come here and learnt your secrets as your husband did.'

"I could afford this shot, I could afford to say anything. We were going to perish by a death the horror of which is beyond all words; had I strangled her as she sat there, the punishment could have been made no worse.

"'Take care,' she said, 'you are in my power. What do you mean?'

"'I mean that your husband penetrated the secrets of Buddha, and that you married him so as to regain those secrets. They were papers and the like, or he would merely have been assassinated in the ordinary vulgar manner, and there would have been an end of the business. Your husband has got an inkling of this, and that is why he has hidden the documents and refuses to give them up; he would be murdered if he did.'

"'You are a bold man,' the princess said.

"'Not at all,' I replied. 'A man can only die once. Would you say that the condemned murderer was rash for attempting to pick the pocket of the gaoler, even for attempting to murder him? What I say and what I do matters nothing. And you know that I am telling the truth.'

"The princess smiled. My friend Ralph here will remember that smile."

"I could see then," Ralph muttered, "and I do remember it."

"'Very well,' the princess replied, 'you are candid and I will be the same. What you have said about my husband is perfectly true. I did marry him to recover those papers. And when I accidentally let out the truth that I was not outcast of my tribe he saw his danger. He is safe till those papers are mine. And then I shall kill him. And yet I love that man—I shall be desolate without him. But my religion and my people come first. For them I lose my caste, for them I degrade myself by becoming the wife of a white sahib, for them I shall eventually die. And yet I love my husband. Aye, you cannot command the human heart.'

"At this I laughed. The princess joined me.

"'You think I have no heart,' she said, 'but you are mistaken. You shall see. For the present I have my duty to perform. I do it thus.'

"She rose to her feet and clapped her hands and spoke in terse, vigorous sentences. A minute later we were bound and our disguises slipped from us. And there for the present you must be content to leave us. To-morrow I shall tell the rest."

Tchigorsky rose and yawned, but Geoffrey would fain have had more.

"The princess," he said; "at least tell me if I know her."

"Of course you do. Princess Zara is the woman who calls herself Mrs. Mona May."

Chapter XXXIII

Vera Sees Something.

It was nearly dawn when Vera came to herself out of an uneasy slumber. The darkest hour that precedes the faint flush in the eastern sky was moving away. There was a light in the room.

Vera rubbed her eyes wondering. It was one of her fancies to have no light in her room. Better to lie with horrors she could not see than have the glimmer from a nightlight filling every corner with threatening shadows.

Vera sat up in bed, forgetting for the moment that she had a raking headache. Something had happened while she slept. Something was always happening in that house of fears, so that Vera was conscious of no new alarm. In a big easy chair at the foot of the bed Marion reclined, fast asleep.

Vera checked an impulse to wake her. In that miserable household sleep was the most blessed of all luxuries. Why, then, should Marion be disturbed? Doubtless she had come there to protect, and doubtless the girl would know all about it in the morning.

"I will not wake her," Vera murmured.

But she could not sleep herself. The splitting, blinding headache was very much in evidence just now. Vera felt that she would give anything for a glass of cold spring water. She poured out that in her own bottle, but it was flat and tepid.

She would go down into the stone-flagged outer kitchen, where the pump was, and get some fresh. In any case, she had not the least idea of going to bed again. Vera partly dressed herself doing up her hair in a big shining knot, and then, in slippered feet, crept down to the kitchen. She had no need of a light—there was already enough to show the way.

How cool and refreshing the water was! She drank a glass and then laved her face in the crystal fluid. All headache was gone by this time, though Vera had a curious trembling of her lower limbs that she could not account for.

She opened a side door leading into a green quadrangle, and from there made her way to the terrace. For a few minutes she stood in a dark angle facing the house, just picked out, as it was, from the gloom. Along the dim corridor some one was advancing with a light.

What could it mean? What was going on? Vera crouched close into the dark corner. She had an idea that she was going to witness something.

The light in the corridor stopped and grew brighter. From the black shadow of the house a human figure crept out and slid along the terrace to a spot where it was just possible for a man of strong courage and cool head to make his way down to the beach at low tide. At high water the sea swept the foot of the cliff.

Vera strained her eyes to make out the figure. It passed so close to her that she might have touched the hem of the white diaphanous garment about it; a faint, sour kind of perfume was in the air. These swiftly flying feet made not the slightest noise. Vera guessed at once that this was one of the Orientals whom she and Geoffrey had seen along the cliffs on a memorable occasion.

She was not far wrong. If not the same, they belonged to the same noisome band. Almost before Vera could recover from her surprise another figure followed.

Vera watched with intense eagerness. Slight and frail though she was, she was not in the least afraid. She came from the wrong race for that. She had made up

her mind to know what was going on even if she ran some danger in obtaining the knowledge. And what did that light mean?

She was soon to know. Presently another figure came along, a tall figure which in the gloom bore a strong resemblance to Tchigorsky. The figure wore boots and a European dress, and did not seek concealment. By his side was yet another figure, also clad in European dress.

"You say this is the place?" the latter man whispered in indifferent English.

"Yes, yes," was the reply, in still more indifferent English. "It is to this place that my master, Dr. Tchigorsky, bade me bring you. And there is the signal."

The light in the corridor waved again.

"I am not satisfied," the stranger muttered. "I am in great danger."

"But not here," the other said eagerly. "Nobody knows you are here. The princess has not the least idea of your presence. And Dr. Tchigorsky, my master, bade me hunt for you until I found you. And I have done it."

"Oh, yes; you have done it right enough. And Dr. Tchigorsky would not have sent for me unless there had been danger. But why not meet him in daylight in a proper and natural manner?"

The other spat gravely on the pavement.

"The doctor is a great man," he said. "He knows. Would you have your enemies to guess that you have seen my master? That is why I bring you here at night. That is why there is the great secret."

The tall man muttered something that sounded like an acknowledgment of the force and cogency of this reasoning.

"I daresay it is all right," he said. "Fetch your master."

The servant salaamed and departed in the direction of the house. He returned presently with the information that Tchigorsky had gone along the terrace. There was a summer-house a little way off, where Tchigorsky waited.

Vera felt her heart beating faster. There was no summer-house along the terrace—nothing but a broken balustrade that Rupert Ravenspur was always going to have mended. Over this there was a sheer drop to the sea below.

As the pair moved on, Vera followed. Then what followed seemed to happen in the twinkling of an eye. A white-robed figure emerged and flung himself upon the stranger. At the same time the other miscreant, who had acted as Tchigorsky's servant, attacked him from behind.

"You rascals," the stranger cried, speaking this time in French. "So I have been deceived. You are going to throw me over the cliff. There is no escape for me. Well, I don't mind much. The agony of suspense has taken all the sweetness out of life for me. I knew that sooner or later this was bound to come. But I am going to take a toll."

The stranger's breath was coming rapidly between his teeth. Vera tried to scream, but no sound emerged from her lips. She stood rooted to the spot, watching what seemed to her a long one-sided struggle. As a matter of fact, it had not lasted more than ten seconds. Gradually the stranger was forced back.

Back and back they forced him to the very edge of the cliff. There was no escape for him now. He reached out two long and swinging hands; he grasped two arms, one for each of his would-be assassins, and then he jumped backwards. Two fearful, wailing yells rent the air; there was a mocking laugh, and silence.

Had she really seen this thing or had she dreamt it? Vera was not sure. Just for a brief moment her senses left her. When she came to herself again she crept along to the house and thence to her bedroom. She locked the door and flung herself upon the bed, pressing her hands to her eyes.

"How long will it last?" she murmured. "How long can one endure this and live? Oh, Heaven! is there no mercy for us?"

Then the blessed mantle of oblivion fell again.

Chapter XXXIV

Exit Tchigorsky.

It seemed to have been tacitly agreed by Geoffrey and Marion that nothing could be gained by telling Vera of the danger that she had escaped. Nothing could be gained by a recital of the dastardly attempt on the previous evening, and only another terror would be added to the girl's life. And, Heaven knows, they all had terrors enough.

On the other hand, Vera had made up her mind to say nothing to the family generally as to her startling adventures. Of course, Geoffrey and Ralph Ravenspur would have to know, but the rest were to be kept in the dark.

Vera's white face and serious air were accounted for by the headache from which she was palpably suffering. Some of the others understood, and they were full of silent sympathy.

"It is nothing," said Vera. "A walk along the cliffs will soon set me right." As she spoke she looked at Geoffrey significantly. He knew immediately that the girl had something important to say to him. He slipped outside and Vera followed him. Not till they were out of sight of the house did she speak.

"Dr. Tchigorsky is still about?" she asked.

"Yes, dear," Geoffrey replied. "As a matter of fact, he is hiding in Uncle Ralph's room. He has his own reasons for so doing, but the reasons are to remain a profound secret. I ought not to have told you. You are not to tell any one."

Vera gave a sigh of relief.

"I promise that," she said. "And I am exceedingly glad to hear that Dr. Tchigorsky is safe. I was not sure whether I had not seen his murder."

Geoffrey regarded Vera in amazement.

"Why, you were in your room all night," he cried. "You were—"

He was going to say 'drugged,' but he pulled himself up just in time.

Vera told her story without further preamble. It was a thrilling one, and none the less so because simply told.

"I don't profess to understand it," Vera concluded. "I tell it you just as it happened. On the whole, I thought it as well to keep the information to myself. I dare say that Dr. Tchigorsky can solve the problem."

"He shall have a chance," said Geoffrey; "I'll tell him after luncheon. But I should not tell a soul else this, Vera."

“I had no intention, Geoffrey. And now, hadn’t we better go back and say good-bye to Mrs. May? She is leaving the house directly.”

Mrs. May did leave the house in the course of the morning, all smiles and blandishments. She had a particularly tender word and squeeze of the hand for Geoffrey, whom she pressed in a whisper to come and see her before long.

“I will,” Geoffrey replied. “You may rely upon that.”

It was with a feeling of intense relief that he was rid of her. It seemed hard to believe that the smiling polished woman of the world, the derniere cri of Western civilisation, should be one and the same with the fanatic princess of the fanatical East.

There was something wild and bizarre about the very suggestion. There was one last smile for every one but Marion who had not appeared, and Mrs. May was gone.

Geoffrey made his way up to his uncle’s room. There he found the two friends smoking. Tchigorsky looked at him from behind a cloud of thin smoke.

“You have news, my young friend,” said Tchigorsky. “I see it in your eyes.”

“I have the most important news,” said Geoffrey, “only it does not convey any impression to me. It is a discovery of Vera’s. She had a fine adventure last night. She was not sure whether or not she had seen you murdered, Tchigorsky.”

“Say on,” Tchigorsky said calmly. “Say on, my boy.”

Geoffrey said on accordingly. He fully expected to surprise his hearers and he was not disappointed. Every word he said was followed with rapt attention.

“And now can you explain it?” Geoffrey asked eagerly.

“To me the explanation is perfectly clear,” Tchigorsky replied. “Last night I told you that there were two other parties to the vendetta now in England, and that it was necessary to get them into the net before we close it. That is no longer necessary, for the simple reason that these two men are dead—drowned.”

“Do you mean that they perished with that stranger last night?”

“Certainly I do. A fine, determined fellow, whose death I cannot sufficiently deplore. And he had his vengeance upon his foes. If he perished, they perished also.”

“But who was he, Tchigorsky?”

“The other man—my fellow-countryman, Voski. Don’t you remember my telling you how the princess spoke of him? He has been hunted down at last. They lured him here and destroyed him under the pretence that I wanted to see him. My presumed servant had only to mention my name, and the thing was done.”

“But why bring him here?”

“Because the place is so quiet. Because they wanted to give their mistress a pleasant surprise. I don’t suppose she knew they were coming.”

“But the light in the corridor?”

“That was a curious and useless coincidence. The light in the corridor was mine. I was looking for something. Neither of those miscreants was ever in the house at all. At the same time they had naturally been informed where I was. To-day they would have gone to their mistress with the pleasing news that they had despatched Voski. I am certain they were saving the news for her.”

“What shall you do about it?” asked Geoffrey.

“I shall do nothing at present,” Tchigorsky replied. “I have a little idea that may work out to our advantage later. Meanwhile, nobody knows of the tragedy, and nobody is to know. This afternoon you are going out fishing in a boat, but in reality you are going to look for their bodies. If you can find them all—”

“We are certain to find them all,” Ralph interrupted. “They will be carried round Gull Reef on the spit of sand under the caves and deposited on the beach, whence the tide ebbs at four o’clock to-day. I have not lived here all my life for nothing. We shall find those bodies within a yard of where I say.”

“And bring them up the cliff,” Geoffrey shuddered. “Ugh!”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” Tchigorsky said coolly. “Bring Voski, of course; but you are to bury the two ruffians in the sand. It will be easy to do so, and pile some rocks over them afterwards.”

Geoffrey ventured to suggest that such a course might end disastrously, the officers of the law not to know of it. Tchigorsky waved the suggestion aside contemptuously. It was no time for nice points like these.

“Those foul creatures are dead, and there is an end of it,” he said. “What can it matter whether there is an inquest held on them or not? If it is, then there will be an end of my scheme. I say you must do this. The future happiness of the family depends upon it. It is also of the utmost importance that Princess Zara does not know of the death of her miscreants.”

Geoffrey nodded. He began to see daylight. And, after all, the concealment of these bodies was no crime.

“What do you say, Uncle Ralph?” he asked.

“Say that Tchigorsky is right,” Ralph croaked; “Tchigorsky is always right. When we get Voski’s body, what shall we do with it?”

“Lay it out in the corridor, where I can get a look at it,” said Tchigorsky. “For the present I do not exist—at least, so far as this house is concerned. All you have to do is to follow my directions.”

The strange pair set out on their excursion in the afternoon. It was a long pull from the village to the cliffs, but it was accomplished at length. The boat was run aground at the least dangerous spot and Ralph and Geoffrey set out along the sands. The former’s step was as free and assured as that of his younger companion.

“Ah!” Geoffrey cried, “you are right. There they are.”

“I knew it,” Ralph replied. “See if they are injured.”

Geoffrey steeled himself to his gruesome task. The three men lay side by side as if they had been placed so by human hands.

As far as Geoffrey could judge, there were no signs of violence on the bodies of either of the natives. They lay by each other, their faces transfixed with rage and horror.

Beyond doubt, these men had been drowned, sucked down by the strong current and cast up again by the sea as if in cruel sport.

“No hurts on either,” Geoffrey muttered.

“It is possible. Look at the other one.”

Geoffrey did so. He saw a face fixed with a grim smile, the smile of the man who can meet death and knows how to punish those who injure him. The face was seared and criss-crossed just like Tchigorsky’s and Ralph Ravenspur’s; indeed,

with its strange disfigurement the dead Russian would have passed for Tchigorsky.

The face was black and swollen from an ugly bruise on the forehead. Had he not known the truth, and had any one told Geoffrey that Tchigorsky lay there, he would have believed it.

A spade had been placed in the bottom of the boat, and with it two deep graves were dug in the sand. Into them the bodies of the Orientals were cast; the sand was made smooth again, and a layer of heavy rocks laid on the top. The body of the Russian was conveyed to the boat, and thence to the house.

There was nobody to see the mournful entry. All the family were on the terrace. A startled servant or two came forward and gave the necessary assistance to convey the body to the dimly-lighted corridor.

"Go to the village and fetch the constable," said Geoffrey. "We have found a dead body on the beach."

The servant went off; the gallery was deserted. In a few minutes the family would be in the house again, and the story would have to be told. Tchigorsky looked cautiously from his hiding-place.

"Is the coast clear?" he asked.

"Perfectly clear," said Geoffrey.

Tchigorsky came forward. For a long time he examined the body. The regret on his face was tempered by a gleam of grim satisfaction.

"It is very like you," said Geoffrey.

"It is me," Tchigorsky whispered. "You are to recognise it as me. The idea is that I fell over the cliffs in the darkness and was drowned. I will explain later. Somebody comes."

Tchigorsky darted off as Marion appeared. She looked white and agitated.

"Another horror," she said. "Sims just told me. Who is it?"

"I regret to say it is Dr. Tchigorsky," said Ralph. "He must have walked over the cliff in the darkness. See here."

Marion bent over the body with a shudder.

"Poor fellow," she said tenderly. "Tchigorsky beyond a doubt."

Ralph turned away, as if in grief. But the grin on his face was the grin of Mephistopheles.

Chapter XXXV

Mrs. May is Pleased.

Geoffrey was fain to confess that he couldn't quite follow. He turned to Ralph, who once more had recovered his old expression—an expression tinged with profound regret. From the hall below came the tones of Rupert Ravenspur demanding to know what it was all about.

"Go and tell your grandfather," Ralph said quietly. "Everybody who comes near us is fated, it seems. Poor Tchigorsky is no more. He was a mysterious man, and

wonderfully reticent as to his past life, but he was the most interesting man I ever met. But I shall never hear anything more about Thibet."

"He was a very old friend of yours?" Marion asked.

"Not so very old," Ralph replied. "And I should hardly call him a friend. We were mutually interested in certain scientific matters. But as to the marvellous side of things he told me nothing."

Speaking by the letter this was perfectly true. Tchigorsky had told Ralph nothing, for the simple reason that they had learnt and suffered together.

"Then why did he come here?" Marion demanded.

"To try to solve the mystery. He declared that Orientalism was at the bottom of it. But we shall never know now. Tchigorsky is no more, and such knowledge as he may have possessed has gone down to the sea with him."

Marion turned away with a sigh. Slight as their acquaintance had been, she had been drawn to Tchigorsky, she said. Strange that whoever tried to help the house of Ravenspur should come under the ban.

"But Tchigorsky was drowned," said Ralph.

"No, indeed," Marion replied. "Oh! I know there are no signs of violence on the body. I know how dangerous the broken balustrade is; but I have my opinions all the same."

"You are wrong in this case," Ralph said, as he walked away.

Presently other people began to arrive. For the first time for many years Ravenspur was invaded by strangers—a policeman or two, a fussy, polite inspector, a journalist with a colleague, pushing everywhere. They would have interviewed Rupert Ravenspur, but the cold glitter of his eye awed even them.

The police let Ralph alone, but Geoffrey was subjected to severe questioning. On the whole he came out of the ordeal better than Ralph had anticipated.

"You managed that very well," he said.

"I feel horribly mean and guilty. All these prevarications—"

"Call them lies, if you like," Ralph put in coolly. "It doesn't matter. Think of the good cause. If ever the end may justify the means, it is here. You are deceiving only our enemies; you are injuring nobody. And you are giving Tchigorsky a heaven-sent opportunity."

"I doubt it, uncle. Clever as Tchigorsky is, well as he may disguise himself, he will fail. Did not the Princess Zara pick you both out at Lassa?"

"That was not quite the same thing. Remember, she knew beforehand that we were going to make the attempt to reach the holy city. She allowed us to go so far because she is naturally a cruel woman. Moreover, all the time her spies had been dogging our footsteps. Before nightfall she will firmly believe Tchigorsky to be dead, which is a great point in his favor. She does not know that her other two miscreants have met with a deserved fate. Tchigorsky will go to her, passing as one of them, and will tell her a wonderful tale as to how he and his ally compassed Voski's death. He will tell how that death entailed the death of his companion."

"It is a tearfully dangerous position."

"Oh! it is. But Tchigorsky will not mind that. He loves danger for its own sake. And he will be able to act the character to the life. He speaks the language perfectly; he is up to all the rites and ceremonies. Tchigorsky will not fall."

The inquest was appointed for the afternoon. It was not likely to last long, and the verdict in the minds of most people was a foregone conclusion. Tchigorsky had walked out into the darkness, he had stumbled over the cliffs, and there was an end of the matter.

Meanwhile the police seemed to have taken possession of the house. And all the time Tchigorsky was seated in a comfortable lounge in Ralph's room smoking cigarettes and making plans for the future.

Geoffrey had gone out after luncheon. He would not be wanted for a full hour and resented the vulgar curiosity of these strangers. Already some of the jury had arrived, and were critically examining the broken balustrades with an owl-like wisdom which in other circumstances would have been amusing.

Geoffrey walked along up the slope towards Jessop's farm. He met a small governess-cart drawn by a donkey coming down the hill. In it was Mrs. May driving slowly along. She pulled up as she saw Geoffrey and held out her hand. Her face was very clear and bright to-day.

"You see, I have already adapted myself to circumstances," she said, when Geoffrey had asked politely and feelingly after the injured foot. "The donkey and I are old friends, and Jessop got the cart for me. So I am all right. By the way, what is it I hear about your finding a body down on the sands?"

"It is quite true," Geoffrey said gravely. "The body of Dr. Tchigorsky."

"Tchigorsky! Dr. Tchigorsky! Do you really mean that?"

The smooth, velvety voice had risen to a hoarse scream. Disappointment, joy, relief danced across the woman's gleaming eyes. For the moment she seemed to forget that she had a companion.

"What a dreadful thing!" she said, catching her natural voice again. "How did it happen?"

Geoffrey gave her the details without flinching.

"It was a bit of a shock for us," he said, "but we are accustomed to them. Of course it will be brought in that the poor fellow met with an accident, but there is not the slightest doubt that he was murdered."

"Murdered! Why should you say that?"

"I don't know. Of course I have no evidence. But Tchigorsky chose to interest himself in our affairs, and he has paid the penalty. That was exactly what Marion said when she saw the body."

"So that poor child actually saw the corpse! How terrible!"

"Marion did not seem to mind. She is small and slender, but she has courage and resolution."

Mrs. May nodded. She had received information that was a long way from being distasteful to her. She plied Geoffrey with questions as to what Tchigorsky had said and done, but Geoffrey evaded them all. Tchigorsky had said nothing; he had hinted vaguely at what he was going to do.

"I knew him years ago," said Mrs. May.

"Oh indeed," Geoffrey replied. "He never mentioned that."

Mrs. May drew a long breath. Evidently she had nothing to fear. Her arch-enemy had gone to his account, leaving no mischief behind. Sooner or later the man would have had to be removed; now he had gone away, saving all the trouble. Really, it was very considerate of Tchigorsky.

"You might come to the inquest and say he was a friend of yours," said Geoffrey.

Mrs. May looked at him sharply. Had she said too much, or did he suspect? But Geoffrey's eyes were clear and innocent of meaning. Mrs. May shuddered. These kind of horrors made her ill, she said.

"Pray do not mention that fact," she implored. "It can do no good, and it may cause a great deal of harm."

Geoffrey disclaimed every intention of making mischief. Besides, as Mrs. May pointed out, there was his uncle Ralph. Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders.

"It is a hard thing to say," he murmured, "but my poor uncle's testimony would not carry much weight. That accident he had some years ago injured his brain. But he is harmless."

Mrs. May exchanged a few more or less banal remarks with her companion and drove on. She had got nothing out of Geoffrey, but he had baffled her, and what was more, had succeeded in lulling a set of lively suspicions to sleep.

The inquest turned out as he had anticipated. The suggestion of foul play was never raised. A surgeon testified to the fact that the deceased met his death by drowning, and that the injury to the face was doubtless caused by a fall on the rocks. Beyond that the condition of the body was normal.

Geoffrey's evidence was plain and to the point. He had little to say. He repudiated the suggestion that the family enemy had had anything to do with the thing. Dr. Tchigorsky was merely a passing visitor; he had met with an accident, and there was an end of the matter. It was impossible to say more than that.

Then to the manifest disappointment of those who had come prepared to be thrilled with sensational details, the inquest was over almost before it had begun. Directed by the coroner, the jury brought in a verdict of "Found Drowned, but how the deceased came by his death there was no evidence to show."

Rupert Ravenspur rose from his seat and ordered the servants to clear the house.

"See that they are all out at once," he said. "Half an hour ago I found two women—ladies, I suppose they call themselves—in the picture gallery with guide-books in their hands. Really there is no sense of decency nowadays."

The curious crowd were forced back, and once more Ravenspur resumed its normal aspect.

"I will see to the burial," Ravenspur said. "The poor man seems to have no friends. And I feel to a certain extent guilty. Geoffrey, you will see that all proper arrangements are made for the funeral?"

Geoffrey bowed his head gravely.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I will see to that."

Chapter XXXVI

Mrs. May Learns Something.

Mrs. May sat among her flowers after dinner. She had dined well, and was on the very best terms with herself. It had been a source of satisfaction to see the body of her worst enemy laid to rest in the village churchyard that afternoon.

For years she had planned for the death of that man, and for years he had eluded her. To strike him down foully had been too dangerous, for had he not told her that he was prepared for that kind of death? Had he not arranged it so that a score of savants in Europe should learn the truth within a month of his decease?

"And kindly fate has removed him for me," she said. "There is no longer danger. What have I to fear now from those wise men of the East? Nothing. They will see that Tchigorsky has died a natural death and will destroy those packets. I can act freely now."

A strange look came over the lovely face, a look that boded ill for somebody. Then the whole expression changed as Geoffrey entered. She had seen him that afternoon; she had asked him to come and he had half-promised to do so. That Mrs. May hated the young man and all his race with a fanatical hatred was no reason why, for the present, she should not enjoy his society.

She was a strange woman, this Eastern, with a full knowledge of Western ways and civilization. She could be two distinct beings in as many minutes.

A moment ago, she was a priestess thirsting for the blood of those who had defiled her creed, for the blood of those to the third or fourth generation, and almost instantly she was the charming hostess she would have been in a country mansion or a West End drawing room. She waved Geoffrey to a seat.

"I hardly dared hope you would come," she said. "But now you are here, make yourself at home. There are some of the cigarettes you liked so well and the claret purchased for me by a connoisseur. I never touch wine myself; but I know you men appreciate it after dinner."

Geoffrey took a cigarette, and poured himself out a glass of the superb claret. The bouquet of it seemed to mingle with the flowers and scent the room. Geoffrey mentally likened himself to an Italian gallant upon whom Lucretia Borgia smiled before doing him to death.

Not that he had any fear of the wine. Mrs. May was a criminal, but she was not a clumsy one. She would never permit herself to take risks like that.

Nevertheless, it was very pleasant, for when Mrs. May chose to exercise her fascinations there was no more delightful woman. And there was always the chance of picking up useful information.

Mrs. May touched lightly on Tchigorsky, to which Geoffrey responded with proper gravity. Had Mrs. May known that Tchigorsky himself was not more than a mile away she would have been less easy in her mind.

"No more visions lately?" she asked.

"No more," Geoffrey replied. "But they will come again. We are hopelessly and utterly doomed; nothing can save us. It is to be my turn next."

Mrs. May started. There was an expression on her face that was not all sympathy.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

Geoffrey slowly extracted from his pocket a sheet of paper. He had discovered it on his plate that morning at breakfast-time. Long and earnestly it had been

discussed by himself, Ralph and Tchigorsky, and it had been the suggestion of the last-named that Geoffrey should find some pretext for mentioning it to Mrs. May.

"This was on my plate this morning," he said. "I don't mind showing it to you, because you are a good friend of mine. It is a warning."

It was a plain half-sheet of notepaper, the sort sold in general shops, at so many sheets a penny. The envelope was to match. Just a few lines had been laboriously printed on the paper; which were as follows:—

"Take care. You are marked down for the next victim; and they are not likely to fail. You are not to go on the sea till you hear from me once more; you are not to venture along the cliffs. If you show this to anybody I shall not be able to warn you again, and your doom will be sealed.—ONE WHO LOVES YOU."

That was all there was; nothing at the top or the bottom. Mrs. May turned this over with a puzzled face and a hand that shook slightly. Under her smile was another expression, the look of one who has been betrayed and is in a position to lay her hand upon the guilty person.

"You are fortunate to have friends with the enemy," she said. "But do you think you were wise to show this to me?"

She was playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse. It was a temptation she could not resist, feeling sure that Geoffrey would not understand. But he did, though he did not show it on his face.

"Why not?" he asked innocently. "Are you not my friend? Personally, I believe it is a hoax to frighten me. You can keep that paper if you please."

"Then you are not going to take any notice of the warning?" asked Mrs. May.

There was a note of curiosity, sharp, eager curiosity, in the question. Geoffrey did not fail to notice it, though he shook his head carelessly.

"I am going to ignore it, as one should ignore all anonymous letters," he said. "If the writer of that letter thinks to frighten me, then he or she is sadly mistaken. I shall go on with my life as if I had never received it."

Mrs. May's lips framed the sentence, "The more fool you;" but she did not utter it. It filled her with satisfaction to find that the warning had been ignored, as it had filled her with anger to know that a warning had been received. And Mrs. May knew full well who was the author of that letter.

"I don't think that I should ignore it," she said. "It may be a cruel piece of mischief; and on the other hand, it may be dictated by a generous desire to help you. So the moral is that you are to keep clear of the cliffs and the sea."

Geoffrey flicked the ash off his cigarette and laughed. He poured himself out a second glass of the amazing claret.

"It is an unusual thing for me to do," he said; "but your claret is wonderful. You speak of the moral; I speak of the things as they are going to be. To-morrow I shall go out fishing alone as if nothing had happened."

"Ah! but you have not spoken of this?"

Mrs. May indicated the letter lying on the table. Geoffrey looked at her reproachfully.

"Have we not trouble and misery enough in our house without making more?" he asked. "Now, I put it to you as a lady of brains and courage, if you had been in my position, would you have shown that to your family?"

Geoffrey lay back in his chair with the air of a man who has put a poser. At the same time he had ingeniously parried Mrs. May's question.

As a matter of fact, nobody but Ralph and Tchigorsky had seen the paper. And the latter point-blank refused to give his reasons why the letter was to be disclosed to Mrs. May.

She looked at Geoffrey with real admiration.

"I shouldn't," she said. "Of course, you are right and I am wrong. And I dare say you will be able to take care of yourself."

He was going to disregard the warning; he was going out alone; and nobody knew what was hanging over his head! Here was a fool of fools, a pretty fellow to assist. Much good that warning had done.

Geoffrey rose to his feet

"And now I must go," he said. "Still, I hope to come again."

The door closed, and she was alone. Hardly had he departed before a dark figure in a white robe crept out of the gloom of the garden into the room. Mrs. May looked at the ragged-looking stranger fixedly.

"Who are you, and whence do you come?" she asked in her native tongue.

The man salaamed almost to the ground.

"I am Ben Heer, your slave," he said; "and I bring you great news."

"Oh!" Mrs. May said slowly; "and so you have come at last!"

Chapter XXXVII

Diplomacy.

Mrs. May crossed rapidly and noiselessly to the door and closed it. Not that there was any need for caution, seeing that the primitive household had been abed long ago. But precautions is never wasted.

There was coffee in the grate, kept hot by means of a spirit lamp. Mrs. May poured out a cup and handed it to her guest.

She lay back in her chair watching him with a keen glance and the easy, natural insolence, the cruel, cutting superiority of the great over the small. The man stood, his hands thrust into the folds of his loose sleeves, a picture of patient resignation.

"How did you get here?" the princess asked.

"At the great house in London I asked, O mistress." Ben Heer replied. "I came over, as thou knowest, to do certain work. There was yet another one with me. And when my work was done I came on to tell what thy slave had accomplished."

"You have proofs of what you say?"

"Else I had not been here. For two years we have followed up the track of the victim. It was as if we had a searched for one single perch in the whole of a great lake of water. But we never tired, and never slept both at the same time. Then at last we got near, and it came to the knowledge of the prey that we were upon him. That was long before the last cold weather that nearly starved us."

The man paused and shivered. The princess nodded with careless sympathy. She had never tried a winter in England, but she could imagine what it was.

"He knew us at last," Ben Heer resumed. "He met us face to face in the public street, and he knew that his hour had come. A night later he was in Paris. At the same time we were in Paris also. He tried Rome, Vienna, Berlin. So did we. Then he came back to London again. When he did so we knew that he had bowed his face before the All-seeing, and prayed that the end might come speedily."

The princess followed all this with impatience. But the man was speaking after the manner of his kind, and could not be hurried.

He would go on to the end without omitting a single detail, and the princess was forced to listen. Despite the Western garb and the evidences of Western life and custom about her, she was no longer Mrs. May, but Princess Zara.

She had only to close her eyes and the droning intonation and passionless voice of the speaker took her back to Lassa again. And the day was near—ah! the day was near when the goal would be reached!

"Once we had him, and once he escaped," Ben Heer went on. "He was a brave man was Voski, and nothing could break down those nerves of iron. He knew that the end was near. It was in a big house—a house near to London—that we found him.

"There were servants, and they were glad to have their fortunes told. It was their evening meal on the table when we got there, and the man Voski Sahib was out. Then, behold, after that evening meal the servants slept till dawn, and at midnight the master returned. He came into his study and the bright flash of the lightning came at the touch of his fingers."

"Electric light," the princess said impatiently. "Go on."

"Then he saw us. We knew that he had no weapon. The door we barred. Then Voski, he sit down and light a cigar, smiling, smiling all the time. When we look at him we see that he moves not so much as a little finger. There was no sign of fear, except that he look at a little box on the table now and then."

"Ah!" the princess cried. "You got it, eh?"

Ben Heer made no direct reply. He was not to be hurried. He meant to describe a sordid murder in his own cold-blooded way. Probably he did not regard the thing as a crime at all; he had been acting under the blessing of the priests.

"'You have come for it?' he asked.

"We bowed low with respect, saying that we had come for it. He lay back in his chair, making a sign for me to approach. Previously we had told him that it was useless for him to call out to the servants."

"You did not tell those servants their fortunes in your present garb?"

"No, no, my mistress. We no such pigs as that... Sahib Voski bid me approach. My friend had the 'pi' ready on the cloth... It was held to the head of the other. And so he died peacefully in his chair."

"Ah! so you say. Where are your proofs?"

Ben Heer slowly withdrew a white packet from the folds of his dress.

"What better proof could the slave of my illustrious mistress have?" he asked. "It is here—the precious stone with the secrets of the gods written on it. Behold!"

With a slightly dramatic gesture a glittering fragment of something that looked like green jade was held on high. The princess grasped it eagerly and devoured it

with her eyes. Words were pouring in a liquid stream from her lips; she was transformed almost beyond recognition.

"At last," she murmured; "at last! But the other one—your companion. How did he die? You say he is dead. How?"

Ben Heer shook his head sadly.

"I cannot say," he replied. "It might have been some scheme on the part of Sahib Voski. When we got back to our room in London we were both dreadfully ill. For days I lie, and when I get better they tell me my poor friend is dead and buried. Then I understood why Voski Sahib smile and smile in that strange way. It was witchcraft, perhaps, or some devil we do not know in the East—but there is the stone."

The princess was regarding the shining stone with a besotted enthusiasm that seemed grotesquely out of place with her dress and surroundings. Perhaps this suddenly flashed upon her, for she carefully locked up the stone.

"You have done well, Ben Heer," she said, "and shall not go unrewarded. The worst part of our task is over; the rest is easy."

"Then the princess goes not back to Lassa?" Ben Heer asked.

"Oh, not yet, not yet. Not till they are destroyed root and branch to the smallest twig on the tree. I have not spared myself, and I am not going to spare others. Yet there remain those of the accursed race yonder, the Ravenspurs. They know too much; they have that which I require. I will kill them off—they shall die—"

"As my mistress slew her husband when his life was of no more value to her?"

"Ah! so you know that? You would not reproach me, Ben Heer?"

"Does the slave reproach the master who keeps his carcase from the kennel?" Ben Heer asked, as he bowed low. "My mistress was right; her hands were washed whiter than the snow in the blood of the Christian. It was well; it was just."

"Then you shall help me, for there is much to be done. Take this ring. Place it on your finger and go to the others. They are outside waiting. Give them the call, thus."

The princess made a faint noise like the drowsy call of a bird, and Ben Heer caught it up at once. He had heard it many times before. Then he slipped out like a cat in the darkness, and presently the call came from the gloom. A moment later it was answered, and then all was still again.

Mrs. May, who had discarded the princess for a moment, closed her window. It was a glad night for her.

"So those two are out of the way," she murmured. "The road is clear at last—clear to the vengeance that must be mine. And with the vengeance comes the wealth that should make me a feared and dreaded power in the East. Give me but the wealth and Lassa shall be my footstool."

Chapter XXXVIII

Geoffrey gets a Shock.

Ralph Ravenspur had wandered along the cliffs and Geoffrey had followed him. The latter came up to the blind man at the loneliest part of the rugged granite, and there for a time they sat. Ralph was graver and more taciturn than usual, till presently his head was raised and he seemed to be listening to something intently.

"What is the matter?" Geoffrey asked.

"Somebody is close to us," Ralph explained. "Somebody is creeping up to us in the gorse. Nay, you need not move. We are safe here on this bare ledge. There is one thing there is no cause to fear in dealing with these miscreants, and that is firearms. Weapons of that description make a noise, and your Oriental hates noise when he is out on the kill. Ah! what did I tell you? Somebody is close by."

A figure rose out of the gorse, a slender figure with a ragged beard and brown face. The stranger crept along and dropped by Geoffrey's side.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "It is only I—Tchigorsky."

Geoffrey was astonished, though he had no occasion to be.

Ralph took the matter coolly. "I expected something like this," he said. "I knew you would desire to see me, and that is why we came along the rocks."

Tchigorsky lay on his back puffing a cigarette.

"Keep your eyes open," he said to Geoffrey. "One can't be too particular. Not that there is any danger, for I've sent those two wretches off on a wild goose chase for an hour or two, and the she-devil is down with one of her blinding headaches. You wouldn't think she was a woman whose heart is in a weak state, eh?"

"I shouldn't have supposed she had one," said Geoffrey. "Have you seen her?"

"I was in her company for a long time last night," Tchigorsky explained. "I posed as one of the murderers of Voski; I gave her proofs of my success."

"The forged Garuda stone," Ralph chuckled.

"The same," Tchigorsky said gravely. "It was a magnificent forgery, and calculated to deceive those pious murderous old rascals at Lassa. At any rate, I am now deep in the confidence of the princess, and attached to her insubordinates, who are pledged to assist in wiping out the Ravenspur family."

Geoffrey sighed involuntarily. He would have liked to know why this vendetta aimed at his family, but he knew that the question would be useless. Still, he felt that a great deal had been gained during the last few hours.

"Have you learnt what the latest villainy is?" Ralph asked.

"Not yet. There is much uneasiness and alarm over the recent failures, and my dusky allies are getting a little frightened. For the next day or two I expect we shall lie low and plan some big coup.

"What I want to secure now are the princess's private papers. I know she has them and is in regular communication with the priests at Lassa. Give me these and I can expose the whole plot. Let me wipe these three people out, and then Lassa shall get a hint that will save further trouble from that quarter.

"A hint from the India Office that any more rascality will mean an expedition to Lassa and the destruction of their temples will suffice. But first I must have my proofs. Without proofs I am helpless."

"Find them," Ralph croaked; "find them. Never mind the scandal, never heed what people may say. Bring the matter home, hang those wretches, and we shall never more be troubled by this plague from the East. If I had my way I would shoot the whole lot."

“And be hanged for your pains,” Tchigorsky replied. “Ah! my friend, there are serious flaws in the criminal law of this fine country of yours. Patience, patience. I shall find out everything in time.”

“There is one thing I am curious to know,” said Geoffrey. “I want to know who was the girl on the cliff with Mrs. May that afternoon—the girl who has such an amazing likeness to Marion? Have you discovered that, Tchigorsky?”

“That is what I am trying to get at myself,” Tchigorsky replied with great gravity. “It is one of the mysteries of the campaign.”

Geoffrey said no more on the point, chiefly because he had no more to say. Yet it was haunting him now, as it had done for some time past. It filled his mind as he made his way down the cliffs after luncheon. And then, to his surprise, as he gained the sands he saw a figure rise from the rocks and flit along the beach until it flashed round a distant point.

It was the girl who bore that surprising resemblance to Marion. She was dressed, as before, in a blue skirt and red tam-o’-shanter.

With a sudden impulse Geoffrey followed. His feet flew over the heavy sands, making no noise. As he turned the rocky point he saw no signs of the girl, but there on the beach with her sketch book on her knee was Marion herself, so deeply interested in manipulating her water-colors that she did not see Geoffrey till he hailed her.

“Did you see her?” Geoffrey gasped.

Marion smiled at his excited face.

“See whom?” she asked. “Oh, yes, some girl did pass me; but I was so busily engaged that I did not look up. How do you think my sketch is progressing? I have been at it all the morning. Vera made me a small bet that I should not finish it to-day, so I am going to win my bet or perish in the attempt.”

Geoffrey was hardly listening. He recollected that there had been some little chaff at luncheon over some sketch, but he had paid little heed to the subject.

“It was the same girl,” he said. “The girl so like you. Oh, Marion, how unfortunate you did not look up!”

“It was indeed,” Marion replied. She appeared to be deeply interested. “I would have given anything to see her. But it is not too late. Put my materials in your boat, Geoff, and I will follow up the cliffs. I can’t be very much use, I’m afraid; but at any rate I may solve this much of the mystery.”

Geoffrey returned to his boat. It seemed very strange to him that Marion should not have seen the girl, and also that on each occasion these two should have been so close together without meeting.

Geoffrey pushed his boat out, got his sails up, and then stood out for the bay. It was very quiet, and no other boats were to be seen. One or two of the upper windows of the castle were visible from there, but no other signs of habitation.

The breeze freshened as Geoffrey reached the open sea. Some distance from him a pile of wreckage covered with a mass of seaweed floated on the water.

“I’ll anchor here and get my lines out,” said Geoffrey.

He luffed, and as he did so a puff of wind filled the sail. The mast gave an ominous crack, and the whole thing snapped and went by the board. Geoffrey stared with widely-open eyes. The wind was as nothing, barely enough to belly the

sail. Then he looked down and saw that the mast had been almost sawn away. Somebody had cut it nearly through, so that the first puff would suffice.

Geoffrey felt vaguely alarmed and uneasy. He was a good four miles from shore, and was an indifferent swimmer. The sea was too dangerous and rough for bathing. There might be further treachery. He sat down and pulled hard at the oars with the idea of returning to the beach again.

As he bent his back to the work, he toppled over the seat with two short stumps in his hands. The oars, too, had been sawn through and Geoffrey was helpless, four miles from land in an open boat, with no means of progress and nobody in sight.

The position was alarming. There would be nothing for it but to wait until some passing craft came along and picked him up. But the time went by without any sign of a boat, and starvation might be the result. Nor was the position improved when it began to dawn upon Geoffrey that the boat was filling fast.

He saw that a large hole had been bored in the bottom and filled with some kind of substance that slowly dissolved in the water. With a tin dipper Geoffrey worked away with all his might, but he could only keep the water from rising higher, and knew that the exertion would soon tell upon him.

“Help!” he cried. “Help! help! help!”

He ceased to call as suddenly as he had begun. What was the use of calling so long as nobody could hear him? And why waste the breath that would be so precious to him later? He could not see that the mass of wreckage and seaweed had drifted close to the boat. He saw nothing till a line thrown into the boat struck him smartly on the face. He looked up.

“Can you manage to keep her afloat?” a hoarse voice came from the wreckage.

“For an hour perhaps,” Geoffrey replied. “Why?”

“That will do,” said the other. “I’ve got a paddle here. Hitch the rope on to the nose of the boat and bail out for all you are worth. This is another of the princess’s little tricks. I expected it; only it hasn’t turned out quite in the way that I anticipated. Now, bail away.”

“Tchigorsky!” Geoffrey gasped. “Tchigorsky!”

“Very much at your service. I rigged up this contrivance this morning and pushed off with it, not long before you came down. But never mind me. Stick to your dipper, and I’ll tell you all about it when we are ashore.”

It was hard and weary work for both of them, but it was accomplished at last. Geoffrey was utterly exhausted when the boat was safely beached, and Tchigorsky, too, felt the effects of his exertions. He lifted himself cautiously off his raft and made a dart for one of the caves.

Inside he had dry clothing, long flowing robes, wig, and hair for his face, pigments that changed the hue of one hemisphere to that of another. Geoffrey, limp and exhausted, watched the artistic transformation with admiration.

“It’s wonderful,” he said, “but then you are a wonderful man, Tchigorsky. How did it all happen? Who did it?”

Tchigorsky smiled as he touched up his face.

“It was inspired by a woman and carried out by a woman,” he said. “I dared not warn you before you started, and indeed I expected further developments. But a woman doctored your boat for you.”

“Was she young and good-looking?” he asked. “Dressed in—”

“Dressed,” Tchigorsky smiled, “in a blue serge dress and a red tam-o’-shanter. I need not ask if you have met the lady before.”

Chapter XXXIX

Princess Zara‘s Terms.

Geoffrey had no reason to fear anything from his adventure in the way of catching cold, seeing that beyond his feet he was not in the least wet. But the exertion had brought the great beads to his forehead, and he lay at the entrance to the cave exhausted.

Meanwhile Tchigorsky had appeared again clad in the long Oriental robes that suited him so well. Even in the strong light that filtered through a crack on to his face Geoffrey found it impossible to recognise him.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.

“All right,” Geoffrey gasped. “I’m a little bit pumped, of course.”

Tchigorsky pointed to the boat pulled over the ledge of rock.

“Then oblige me by shoving her off and letting her sink in shallow water,” he said. “It is not pleasant and may cause your friends a great deal of anxiety, but for a little while it will be necessary for the world to regard you as one who has met with a watery grave.”

“But surely this does not apply to my family?” Geoffrey asked anxiously.

“To your family most of all,” said Tchigorsky coolly. “It is all part of the scheme. I am the last man in the world to cause unnecessary suffering—goodness knows I have had enough of my own—but one must be cruel to be kind sometimes. I have worked out the scheme; I have seen the enemy’s cards, and I am playing mine accordingly. I tell you the step is imperative.”

“But Vera,” groaned Geoffrey. “It will kill Vera. In normal circumstances the shock would be great; with a girl who had been so awfully tried the news may mean loss of reason.”

“I have thought of that,” Tchigorsky said. “At least your uncle Ralph and I have worked it out between us. Miss Vera is not to know anything of our scheme, but she is to know that you are safe and well. Come; I fancy you can trust Ralph Ravenspur.”

Geoffrey nodded. He felt easier in his mind. Not that he was satisfied; but it would be flying in the face of Providence to interfere with the delicate and deeply laid scheme of a man like Tchigorsky.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll do as you desire.”

“Then push the boat off without farther delay. You will understand why I don’t want to be seen in the matter. Go, before any one comes along.”

Geoffrey went obediently. He had not much fear of anybody passing. Nevertheless he did not neglect proper precautions. As he reached the cave again he found Tchigorsky lying on a heap of dry seaweed smoking a cigarette.

“I suppose I have to think Mrs. May for this?” Geoffrey asked.

“For this and other things,” Tchigorsky nodded. “I knew it was coming; in fact, very little can happen now that I am not in a position to discount. My ruse succeeded capitally. Behold in me Ben Heer, one of the two miscreants who succeeded in destroying Voski. My colleague perished in the attempt.”

“The princess is convinced of that?”

“Absolutely. She is certain that I, Sergius Tchigorsky, have gone over to the great majority. Besides, I have placed proofs of my alleged crime in her hand—the Garuda stone all the fuss was about. It is a clever imitation, but that is beside the question.”

“So you have been taken into her confidence?”

“Well, not exactly that. But every new scheme is relegated, so far as details are concerned, to some of us, and therefore I am in a position to discount the future. In ordinary circumstances I should simply have warned you against going fishing to-day, and thus check-mated the foe again; but that would have been inartistic.

“Besides, I wanted the princess to regard you as another victim—hence the whole of this rather cheap dramatic business. You will come to life again in a few hours—when we shall have to be guided by events.”

“Who was it who tampered with the boat?”

“You will learn in good time. Let us, meanwhile, assume that it was the work of one of my dusky companions. For the present you and I remain where we are—till dark probably—when it will be possible to smuggle you up to your uncle’s room. I have not been regardless of your creature comforts. Here are cold meat and a bottle of champagne. We dine together.”

Geoffrey accepted his portion with resignation. And Tchigorsky was an entertaining companion. There was no dullness in his presence.

“Very well,” Geoffrey said as he lighted a cigarette. “We are safe here. Now’s the time for a further recital of your thrilling adventures in Lassa.”

“Agreed,” Tchigorsky cried. “Where did I leave off?”

“You had been gagged and bound at the instigation of the princess.”

“True. It is also true that but for the intervention of the same princess we should have been torn to pieces on the spot; and incidentally, I may mention that that would have resulted in the absolute extinction of the house of Ravenspur. The men who a moment before had been grave, reserved priests were transformed instantly into raging fiends.

“Had they been possessed by devils they could not have flamed out more suddenly. They were mad to know that the secrets of all ages had passed into the hands of Christian dogs who had defiled their altars. And yet much the same kind of barbarous fanaticism has been displayed in civilised dominions. They were not any worse than the bigots who burned your English martyrs.

“We should have been torn to pieces on the spot, as I told you, but for the authority of the princess. So common-place a death did not suit her ideas of the eternal fitness of things. Many and many a time afterwards, when racked by agony, I deeply deplored that supposed act of clemency. It would have been a far more merciful death.

“Well, we were spared for the moment and cast into a loathsome dungeon, where we were overrun with vermin, great rats which we had constantly to drive off, and spiders whose bites were very painful.

“How long we lay without food I don’t know; anyway, it seemed days. Perhaps it was only so many hours. Try lying in the pitch dark, fighting with nameless, unseen terrors, and see how many bitter years can be crammed into a minute. And yet we knew there was far worse to come. But for the fact that we were together and could cheer the black hours with the sound of each other’s voices, we should have gone mad. One moment we were cast down in the depths of gloom, the next we prayed for death; anon we laughed and sang sketches of gay songs. We were not insane, but were treading perilously near to the borderland.

“Then, after many years—or so it seemed to us—they fetched us again. We were not led into the banqueting hall, but to a long, low, vault-like place on the floor of which were two shallow tanks or baths covered over with a frame of iron, and from the frame of iron ran long, sliding rods for all the world like a bird-cage, only the sliding wires of the cage ran far into the room.

“Around these cages were glowing charcoal fires, the greater part of the sliding bars or wires growing red and crocus blue from the heat. What did it mean?

“I wondered. Ah! I was very soon to know.”

Tchigorsky drew a deep breath, and a shudder passed over his powerful frame. The moisture on his forehead was not due to the heat alone.

“On a throne of stone the princess was seated. A few of the higher-grade priests were grouped around her. Evidently they had been discussing us, and had made up their minds. We were not going to be tried even.

Illustration:
On a throne of stone the princess was seated.

“‘Stand there!’ the princess commanded. ‘Dogs, do you want to live?’

“Ralph Ravenspur said nothing. He was ever a man of few words.

“‘We have no desire to die,’ I replied. ‘Nothing that breathes ever has. Even if I were an old man with one foot in the grave the desire for life would be as strong upon me as it is now!’

“The princess smiled. I will not try to describe that smile. If you had seen it you would have given ten years of your life to forget it again.

“‘It is in your hands to live,’ the woman said; ‘It is for you to say whether or not you return to your people. But you shall not carry our cherished secrets to the West. You shall live, you shall go free, but you shall take no memory of the past with you!’

“I guessed at once what she meant. There were attendants upon the priests—poor fools who fetched and carried, who would undertake errands one at a time, but who had no reasoning powers, no wits of their own.

“They were not born idiots; they had been made so. They are put under drugs, a portion of the scalp is removed, and then some small fragment of the brain is destroyed. We could have our liberty if we chose, but at what price! We could go free, but for the rest of our lives we should never know the blessed light of reason again.

“I tell you it came to me like a cold shock, and turned me faint and giddy. As I glanced at my companion I saw that he was ghastly as myself. What use was life to us under such conditions! And the fiends were equal to the cruelty of getting us to consent to this operation and then detaining us afterwards. We should be a mockery among them and a warning to others.

“There was no reason to discuss this refined cruelty, this vile offer. We glanced at each other and shook our heads. Far better death than this. We knew how to die; we could have drawn our revolvers and shot each other then and there. But we did not. While there was life there was hope.”

Chapter XL

The Iron Cage.

Tchigorsky made a long pause before he resumed his story. His nerves appeared to require composing. It was impossible to shake off the horror of the past. At length he went on again.

“I saw the cruel light flame into the eyes of the princess; I saw that she was pleased and yet sorry to learn our decision. She gave a sign and we were brought nearer to her.

“‘You understand what your refusal means!’ she said. ‘You have been here long enough to know how carefully our secrets are guarded, and also how we punish those who try to read them. Where are those scripts?’

“We had no scripts, and I said so. As a matter of fact, such formulae and papers as we had managed to become possessed of had been smuggled beyond Lassa to Ralph Ravenspur’s servant, Elphick, who had conveyed them to a place of safety. But my statement was without effect.

“She turned sharply to her attendants.

“‘Strip them,’ she said, ‘and put them in the baths.’

“We were going to learn then what those cages were for.

“‘There is no need to remove our clothing,’ I cried. ‘We will do it ourselves!’

“I was afraid our revolvers should be discovered, or the cartridges be rendered useless by immersion. Ralph seemed to understand, for, like myself, he quickly discarded his robes and slippers and professed himself to be ready.

“Then the grating was raised, and we were placed on our backs in a shallow bath formed in the shape of a coffin, and not more than ten inches deep. At first the baths were empty, but gradually they were filled with water until we had to raise our faces and press them against the bars to breathe. I thought that we were to be suffocated in this shallow water—a dreadful idea that filled me with stifling anxiety—but there was worse to come.”

Again Tchigorsky paused and wiped his brow.

“The suspense was torture; the terrible uncertainty or what was going to happen was agony. Imagine being drowned with a bare half-inch of water over your lips and nostrils! I turned my head a fraction of an inch on one side, and then I saw

that the water could not rise quite high enough to drown me without overflowing the edge of the bath. Evidently this was but the first chapter in the book of lessons. We could breathe by placing our faces against the bars. What next.

"There was no occasion to ask the question. Though my heart was drumming like the wings of an imprisoned fly, and though there was the roar of a furnace in my ears, I could make out the crack and rattle of machinery, and the bars over the cage began to move. My face, to escape the water, was so closely pressed to the bars that the friction was painful.

"The bars slid along, and as they did so I remembered the long projecting ends which were glowing yellow and blue in the braziers. My heart ceased drumming, and then seemed to stand still for the moment. I had guessed the riddle. A second later and the horizontal bars over my face were white hot.

"Here was the situation, then—I had either to press my face against those cruel bars or drown in a few inches of water. Could the mind of man imagine a more diabolical torture? I cried aloud; I believe my friend did also, but I cannot say. My face flinched involuntarily from the scar of the blistering iron; I held my breath till the green and red stars danced before my eyes.

"Flesh and blood could stand it no longer, and I was literally bound to raise my head. Into the flesh, as you have seen for yourself, those hot barriers pressed, while I filled my lungs with a deep draught of delicious air. But the agony was so great that I had to go down again. The water cooled the burns for the moment. But you call imagine how it intensified the agony afterwards.

"When I raised myself again the bars were cool. But only for an instant, for they came hot once more, this time in a horizontal direction. The same ghastly business was enacted; again there was the sense of semi-suffocation, again the long draught of pure air and the pain from the bars. And then while wondering, half-delirious, how long it could last, something gave way and I fainted.

"That I deemed to be death; but it was nothing of the kind. When I came to I was lying on the floor writhing in agony from my wounds. Fortunately I had not lost my sight, nor had Ralph at that time. He was to discover later that the injuries received were fatal to his eyes.

"He was lying by my side and groaning with pain like myself. A more hideous and repulsive sight than my companion's face I never wish to look upon. And doubtless he had the same thoughts of me. But I did not think of that at the moment.

"We were alone. I staggered to my feet and across to the door. It was fastened, of course. For a time we were too maddened by pain to take heed of anything, but gradually reason came back to us. My first idea was of revenge. Ralph had grasped for his robes and his revolver was in his hand.

"'Heaven help the first man who comes in!' he yelled.

"Like a drunken lunatic, I applauded the sentiment. For a minute we were both mad as the drugged Malay who runs amok. Fortunately nobody did come in for some time, and gradually wiser counsels prevailed. We slipped into our garments and hid our revolvers. Then from raging madmen we passed to tears. We were so spent and exhausted that we cried like little children.

"But men like ourselves are not easily daunted. The pain was still great, but this only stimulated our desire to live and gain the better of those who had so cruelly

used us. Later a priest conducted us into another room, where the princess awaited us.

"She smiled as she looked into our faces. That smile was nearly the end of her. Many a time since have I regretted that I didn't finish her career then and there. Had she betrayed the least sign of fear I should have done so. And by so doing your people would have been saved many a bitter sorrow."

"At the expense of your life," Geoffrey said.

Tchigorsky shrugged his shoulders.

"What matter?" he said. "The few suffer for the many. Well, as I was saying—"

The speaker paused suddenly as his eye caught something moving along the beach. It was the figure of a woman creeping along as if in search of some missing object. She proceeded very slowly until she approached the spot where the boat lay filled and sunk, and then she paused abruptly.

For a minute she stood fascinated by the sight, then she flung her hands high in the air, and a bitter wailing cry escaped her. If she had been a fisherman's wife suddenly brought face to face with the dead body of her husband or lover, her wail of anguish had not been more poignant.

"Who can she be?" Geoffrey asked.

Tchigorsky said nothing. The woman stood with her hands raised. As she turned and ran towards the cliffs, moaning as she went, Geoffrey started.

"Marion," he said. "Marion."

He would have dashed forward, but Tchigorsky restrained him.

"That is not your Marion," he said. "Your Marion does not dress like that."

Geoffrey looked again. It was Marion, and yet not Marion. It was the girl in the blue serge dress and red tam-o'-shanter who resembled her so strikingly. What did this girl know about him, and why did she stand wailing over the boat? He felt he must solve this mystery.

"Sit down," Tchigorsky said slowly. "Sit down."

"But," Geoffrey cried, "I insist upon knowing—"

"And spoiling everything. Sit down, I say, or I shall have to detain you. I don't fancy you would care to measure your strength with mine."

Geoffrey dropped into his seat.

"Perhaps not," he said. "I don't believe you want me to know who that girl is."

"I have heard worse guesses," Tchigorsky said drily.

Chapter XLI

Waiting.

They were growing uneasy at the castle. There was a forced cheerfulness about the small party that testified to the nervous tension that held them. For some years now there had been a tacit understanding on the subject of punctuality. Such a thing was necessary when any moment might precipitate the next

catastrophe. The mere fact of anybody being late for five minutes put the rest in a fever. And Geoffrey had not come into tea at all.

The thing was almost in itself a tragedy. Geoffrey was always so considerate of others. Nothing in the world would have induced him to stay away without first saying he was going to do so or sending a message. And tea had been a thing of the past for a good hour. What could have become of him?

Nobody asked the question; but it was uppermost in the minds of all. Vera was chattering with feverish gaiety, but there was a blazing red spot on her ghastly white face, and her eyes were wild and restless.

Marion had slipped away. The only one who betrayed no anxiety was Ralph. He sat sipping his cold tea as if he had the world to himself and there was nobody else in it.

Presently, with one excuse or another, all slipped away until Vera was alone with Ralph. He was so quiet that she had almost forgotten his presence. When she thought herself alone she rose to her feet and paced the room rapidly.

She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples.

"God spare him!" she whispered; "spare him to me! Oh! it is wicked to feel like this and so utterly selfish. But if Geoffrey dies I have nothing to live for."

The tears rose to her eyes, tears of agony and reproach and self-pity. Ralph crossed the room silently. He was upon the girl ere she had heard the soft fall of his footsteps. He laid a hand on Vera's arm.

"Geoffrey is not going to die," he said.

Vera suppressed a scream. She might have cried out, but something in the expression of Ralph's face restrained her.

"Are you sure of that?" she asked.

"As sure as one can be certain of anything, child. We are alone?"

"There is nobody else here, uncle."

"One cannot be too careful," Ralph muttered. "Then Geoffrey is safe."

"Thank Heaven. You have sent him somewhere, uncle?"

"No; I have not sent him anywhere. And you are not going to ask any questions. I have told you so much to spare you the agony and suspense that will overtake the others. I tell you because, had you not known, the mental strain might have broken you down," continued Ralph.

"Before long it will be proved almost beyond a demonstration that Geoffrey had become a victim to the family foe. There will be evidence to convince a jury, but all the time Geoffrey will be safe."

Vera said nothing. She could only gasp. Ralph's hand lay on her shoulder with a grip that was not devoid of pain.

"You are not to show your feelings to any one," he croaked. "You are not to betray your knowledge by a single sign. Ah! if I could tell you how much depends upon your courage, reticence, and your silence!"

"I think you can trust me, Uncle Ralph."

"I think I can, dear. I like the ring of your voice. You are to be quiet and subdued as if you were unable to comprehend the full force of the disaster. Much, if not everything, depends upon the next few hours. Now go, please."

Ralph slipped away into the grounds. A little later he was making his way along the cliffs towards the village. For a brief time Vera stood still. She was trying to realise what Ralph had said.

"What did it mean?" she asked herself again and again. But she could find no answer to the puzzle. Still Geoffrey was safe. Whatever sensation the next few hours might produce Geoffrey had come to no harm. It would be hard to see the others surfer, hard to witness their grief, and not lighten it by so much as a sign.

But Ralph had been emphatic on this point. Had he not said that everything hinged upon her reticence and silence? Vera went slowly to her room, her feet making no sound on the thick pile carpet. A flood of light streamed through the stained-glass windows into the corridor. In the big recess at the end a white figure lay face downwards on the cushions.

Vera approached softly. She saw the shoulders rise and fall as if the girl lying there were sobbing in bitter agony. It was Marion—Marion the ever-cheerful! Surely her grief must be beyond the common?

"Marion," Vera whispered. "Dear Marion."

She bent over the prostrate figure with heartfelt tenderness.

Marion raised her face at length. It was wet with tears, and her eyes were swollen. At first she seemed not to recognise Vera.

"Go away," she said hoarsely. "Why do you intrude upon me like this? Am I never to have a minute to myself? Am I always to carry the family troubles on my shoulders?"

She spoke fiercely, with a gleam in her eyes that Vera had never seen before. She drew back, frightened and alarmed. It seemed incredible that gentle Marion could repulse her like this. But she did not go.

Marion was beside herself with grief; she did not know what she was saying. It was impossible to leave her in this condition.

"You are grieving for Geoffrey," she said. "He will come back to us."

"Geoffrey is dead," Marion wailed. "He will never come back. And I—"

She paused; she had not lost control of herself entirely. But the look in her eyes, the expression of her face, the significant pause, told Vera a story. It burst upon her with the full force of a sudden illumination.

"Marion," she whispered, "you love him as well as I do—"

So her secret was known at last! And Marion was only a woman after all. The selfishness of her grief drove away away all other emotion.

"As you do?" she cried. "What do you with your gentle nature know of love? You want the wild, hot blood in your veins to feel the real fire of a lasting, devouring affection. I tell you I love him ten thousand times more than you do. Look at me; I am utterly lost and abased with my grief and humiliation. Am I not an object of pity? Geoffrey is dead, I tell you; I know it; I feel it. Love him as you do! And you stand there without so much as a single tear for his dear memory."

Vera flushed. The words stung her keenly. How cold and callous Marion must think her! And yet Marion would have been equally cold and self-contained had she known. And it was impossible to give her a single hint.

"My heart and soul are wrapped up in Geoffrey," she said. "If anything happens to him I shall have nothing to live for. But I am not going to give way yet. There is still hope. And I shall hope to the end."

Marion sat up suddenly and dried her tears.

"You are a reproach to me," she said with a watery smile. "Not one word of reproof has passed your lips, and yet you are a reproof to me. And to think that you should have learnt my secret! I could die of shame."

Vera kissed the other tenderly.

"Why?" she asked. "Surely there is no shame in a pure and disinterested affection?"

"From your point of view, no," said Marion. "But if you could place yourself in my position you would not regard it in the same light. I have cared for Geoffrey ever since I came here; all along I have loved him. I knew that he was pledged to you, and knew that he could never be anything to me and still I loved him. Who shall comprehend the waywardness of a woman's heart? And now he is dead."

Once more the tears rose to Marion's eyes; she rocked herself to and fro as if suffering from bitter anguish.

"I do not believe that Geoffrey is dead," said Vera. "Something tells me that he will be spared. But why go on like this? Anybody would imagine that you had something to do with it from the expression of your face."

Marion looked up suddenly.

"Something to do with it?" she echoed dully, mechanically.

"I wasn't speaking literally, of course," Vera went on. "But your curious expression—"

"What is curious about my expression?"

"It is so strange. It is not like grief, so much as remorse."

Marion broke into a queer laugh, a laugh she strangled. As she passed her handkerchief across her face she seemed to wipe out that strange expression.

"I hope remorse and I will remain strangers for many a long day," she said more composedly. "It is so difficult to judge from faces. And I must try to be brave like yourself. I have never given way before."

"I believe you are the bravest of us all, Marion."

"And I that I am the greatest coward. I have even been so weak as to allow the secret of my life to escape me. Vera, I want you to make me a most sacred promise."

"A dozen if you like, dear."

"Then I want you to promise that Geoffrey shall never know of your discovery. At no time are you to tell him. Promise."

Marion looked up eagerly and met Vera's eyes. They were clear and true and honest; they were filled with frankness and pity.

"I promise from my heart," she said. "Not now nor at any time shall Geoffrey know what I have learnt to-day."

Marion blessed the speaker tenderly.

"I am satisfied," she said. "He will never know."

Chapter XLII

The Search.

Mrs. May sat out on the lawn before the rose-garlanded windows of her sitting-room. A Japanese umbrella was over her dainty head, a scented cigarette between her lips. For some time she had been long and earnestly sweeping the sea with a pair of binoculars.

She rose at length and made her way down the garden. There was a rugged path at the bottom, terminating in a thicket that overhung the cliffs.

Here it would be possible for a dozen men to hide without the slightest chance of being discovered. Nobody ever went there by any chance. Shaded from the house, Mrs. May paused.

A softened whistle came from her lips, and then there sprang up from the ground the dusky form of the man who called himself Ben Heer. He salaamed profoundly.

"Well?" the woman demanded impatiently. "Well?"

"Well, indeed, my mistress," the sham Ben Heer replied calmly. "It fell out as you arranged. Behold a puff of wind carried away the masts, and behold the oars came into fragments. Then the boat began to fill, and it now lies bottom upwards at the foot of the cliff."

"But he might have been a powerful swimmer."

"He was no swimmer at all. I saw everything."

"It was not possible for him to be picked up?"

"Not possible, my mistress. There was no boat, no sail to be seen. The boat foundered and there was an end of it. I waited for some time, and I saw no more."

Mrs. May nodded carelessly. She might have been receiving the intelligence of the drowning of a refractory puppy. She betrayed neither regret nor satisfaction.

"Of course, they will guess," she said. "When they come to examine the boat and the oars they will see at once that there has been foul play. Once more they will know that the enemy has struck a blow."

"My mistress is all-powerful," Ben Heer murmured.

"They will try to trace us once more, Ben Heer."

The sham Asiatic shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"And they will fail," he said. "They know not the powers arrayed against them; the dogs know not my gracious mistress. Meanwhile, thy slave can see through the bushes that somebody awaits your presence."

Mrs. May glanced in the direction indicated by Ben Heer. On the lawn Rupert Ravenspur was standing. The woman smiled. There was the head of the hated house actually seeking out the foe.

"Your eyes are sharper than mine," she said. "Well, you have need of them. Meanwhile, you had better discreetly disappear for the time being."

Mrs. May advanced to greet her guest, who bowed with his old-fashioned grace.

"This is an unexpected honor," the woman said.

"I can claim nothing on the score of politeness or gallantry," Rupert Ravenspur replied. He was quiet and polished as usual; but there was a look of deep distress on his face. "I came here not to see you, but in the faint hope of finding my nephew Geoffrey. I have ascertained that he came to see you sometimes."

“He has been so good,” Mrs. May murmured. “I assure you I appreciate the company of a gentleman in this deserted spot.”

“Then he has not been here today?”

“I have not had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Geoffrey to-day.”

Ravenspur groaned. He turned his face away, ashamed that a woman should see him in a moment of weakness. Out of the corner of her eye she regarded him. There was not an atom of pity in her heart for him.

“I hope you don’t anticipate anything wrong,” she said. “Mr. Geoffrey is not a boy that he cannot—”

“Oh, you do not understand! It is not that at all. In ordinary circumstances I could trust Geoffrey to the end of the world. He is a good fellow, and capable of taking care of himself and upholding the family honor. But others as strong and more cunning have fallen before the dreaded foe, until all confidence has left us. I fear that harm has come to Geoffrey.”

“But surely in the broad daylight—”

“Daylight or darkness, it is the same. You know nothing of the boy?”

“Nothing, save that he was going fishing to-day.”

Ravenspur started.

“Oh!” he cried. “Then I shall soon know the worst. I am sorry to have troubled you; I will go down to the beach. The others are searching in all directions. Nobody will return to the house until we know the lad’s fate.”

Ravenspur bowed and was gone. Mrs. May smiled after him. So the castle was going to be left for the time being.

“This is a chance not to be lost,” she murmured. “The full run of the castle! Fate is playing into my hands with a vengeance.”

Full of the wildest apprehensions, Ravenspur made his way to the beach. It was no easy task for a man of his years, but he made light of it, as he used to half a century ago. Two fishermen coming up touched their hats.

“Have you been out to the west of Gull Point to-day?” Ravenspur asked.

“No, sir,” was the reply. “Not one of us. The mackerel came in from the east, and there were so many we had every bottom afloat. I did hear as Mr. Geoffrey had gone out in the West Bay, but I can’t say for sure.”

Again Ravenspur groaned; no longer had he the least doubt about what had happened. There had been more foul play, and Geoffrey had gone down under the dark waters. The old man’s heart was full to bursting, but his grief was for Vera more than for himself.

“I am afraid there has been another of those tragedies that are so mournfully identified with our name,” he said. “Wass and Watkins, will you come with me?”

The fishermen dropped the brown tangled nests upon their shoulders and followed. They were all tenants, vassals almost, of the Ravenspurs and ready to do their bidding. The foe would have had a hard time did he fall into the clutches of these veterans.

“I am going down to search the beach,” Ravenspur explained. “I know that my nephew went out fishing this afternoon. I shall know his fate soon.”

It was some time before anything was found. Wass came stumbling over the rocks, and there in a clear pool he saw the boat bottom upwards. At the cry of dismay that came from him, Watkins hurried up.

“Give a hand with the painter, Bill,” Wass said hoarsely. “There’s the boat right enough, with a good round hole under the gunwale.”

Ravenspur watched in silence. He saw the boat beached; he saw the hole in her side. Wass pointed to the mast where it had been sawn off.

“Poor young gentleman,” he exclaimed, with a heavy outburst of grief. “And to think that we shall never see him again. Look at this, sir.”

“The mast seems to have been sawn off,” said Ravenspur.

“Almost off, sir,” said Watkins. “Enough to give if a puff of wind came. And that hole has been plugged with soft glue or something of the kind. If I could only lay a hand on ‘em.”

He shook his fist in the air in impotent rage; tears filled his eyes. Ravenspur stood motionless. He was trying to bring the force of the tragedy home to himself, trying to shape words to tell Vera without cutting her to the heart. He was long past the more violent emotions.

He turned to Wass like a man in a dream.

“Go up to the castle,” he said. “See my son Gordon and bid him come here. They must all come down, all aid in the search. Not a word more; please go.”

Chapter XLIII

Nearer.

To Geoffrey the position was a strange one. There was something unreal about the whole thing. Nor was it pleasant to remember that by this time the family had missed him, and were doubtless bewailing him for dead.

“I am afraid there is no help for it,” said Tchigorsky. “I could not see my way to certain conclusions and ends without inconvenience.”

“Something more than inconvenience,” Geoffrey murmured.

“Anxiety, troubles, what you like,” Tchigorsky replied coolly. “It is necessary. I want to have the castle cleared for a time, and I could think of no better and less suspicious way of doing it. The anxiety and suspense will not last long, and by daylight your people shall see you again. And the one who is most likely to suffer has already been relieved.”

So Geoffrey was fain to wait in the cave listening to Tchigorsky’s piquant conversation, and waiting for the time to come for action.

“There will be plenty to do presently,” the Russian said. “Meanwhile, I am going to leave you to yourself for a space. The woman who regards me as her servant may need me. And, remember, you are not to leave the cave in any circumstances, else all my delicately laid plans will be blown to the winds.”

So saying, Tchigorsky disappeared. It seemed hours before anything happened. It was safe in the cave. Nobody was likely to come there, and if they did there was not the slightest chance of discovery, for the cave went far under the cliff, and was dark as the throat of a wolf.

By-and-bye there came the sound of voices on the beach, and Rupert Ravenspur, followed by the two fishermen, appeared. Geoffrey's heart smote him as he saw his grandfather. Then they found the boat, and directly afterwards the two fishermen rushed away, leaving Ravenspur behind.

It was only the strongest self-control that prevented Geoffrey from making his presence known to the figure gazing so sadly at the boat. But he remembered Tchigorsky's warning.

After all, he reflected, it would only be for a little time. And the head of the family knew nothing of the great conspiracies working themselves out around him. His open, honorable nature would have shrunk from the subtle diplomacy and cunning that appealed so powerfully to Tchigorsky.

Rupert Ravenspur would not have tolerated the position for a moment. He would have insisted upon going to Mrs. May and having the matter out at once, or he would have called in the police. And that course would be fatal.

So Geoffrey was constrained to stay and watch. Presently he saw the fishermen return, followed by the family. There was a gathering about the foundered boat, and then Geoffrey turned his eyes away, ashamed to witness the emotion caused by what they regarded as his untimely death.

He had seen them all, and beheld their grief. He could see Marion bent down with a handkerchief to her streaming eyes and the head of the family comforting her. He saw Vera apart from the rest gazing out to sea.

Beyond, a fleet of boats were coming round the point. They were small fishing smacks in search of the drowned Ravenspur.

Geoffrey pinched himself to make sure he was awake. It is not often that a live man sits watching people search for his dead body.

But there was comfort in the knowledge that Vera was aware of everything. Geoffrey could see that she had been told. That was why she kept apart from the rest. She walked along the sands past the mouth of the cave, her head bent down.

Flesh and blood could stand it no longer; in the mouth of the cave Geoffrey stood and called Vera softly by name.

The girl started and half turned.

"Don't be alarmed," Geoffrey whispered. "I am in the cave. It is safe here. Watch your opportunity and come in, for I must have a few words with you. Only do it naturally, and don't let anybody suspect."

Vera had turned her back to the cave, and appeared to be sadly gazing over the sea. Gradually she slipped back, watching the others, who apparently had forgotten her, until she was lost in the gloom of the cavern.

A moment later and Geoffrey had her in his arms. It was good to feel her heart beating against his, to feel her kisses warm on his lips.

"Did Tchigorsky tell you?" he asked.

"No, Uncle Ralph. Oh! I am so glad to see you again, Geoffrey. I knew you were not lost, that you would be safe after what uncle said, and yet all the time there was a strange void in my heart."

"But my darling, I am safe."

Vera laid her head restfully on his shoulder.

"I know, I know!" she said. "But I have had a foretaste of what might have been. When Wass and Watkins came and told me that your overturned boat had been

found, I began to realise what it might be to live without you. Dear Geoff, will it be long before all this anxiety is disposed of?"

Geoffrey kissed her trembling lips.

"Not long, so Tchigorsky says, and I have implicit faith in him. The present situation is all part of the plot for our salvation. And the others?"

"Are heartbroken. My poor grandfather looks ten years older. You know how entirely he has been wrapped up in us. I feel sure that if he could have saved us by sacrificing the rest, himself included, he would have done so."

"I know," Geoffrey said hoarsely. "I know, dear. And Marion?"

"Marion is sorely disturbed. I hardly know what to make of her. For the first time she positively appears to be frightened. And Marion is not the girl who cries. I was alarmed about her a little time ago," replied Vera.

"Ah! well, it won't be very long," Geoffrey said consolingly. "To-morrow morning Tchigorsky has promised that I shall be safe and sound in the bosom of the family again. What are they going to do now?"

"They are going to search until they find you. All the boats from the village are out, even the servants are assisting. You can understand how I should feel if I did not know everything. I could not stay in the house; I could do no more than wander along the shore feeling that I was helping. It would be impossible to remain in the house, and that is what they all feel. There is a full moon to-night, and they will be here till they are exhausted."

Geoffrey nodded. He was wondering how he was going to account for his absence and for the manner in which he was finally to turn up safe and sound again. He would have to concoct some story of being picked up by a passing boat and landed some way down the coast.

"They guess I am a victim to the vendetta?" he asked.

"Of course. They say the mast and oars were partly sawn away. It will be the talk of the country in a few hours. Geoffrey, I must go. Don't you see that they have missed me?"

Vera had been missed. Already Marion was calling her. There was just the chance that she might be yet another victim. Vera slipped out of the cave, walking backwards as if she were looking for something.

"You won't betray yourself?" said Geoffrey.

"I'll try not to, dear. I understand how necessary it is that the truth should be concealed. And yet it is hard not to be able to ease their minds."

Vera was clear of the cave by this time, and her voice ceased. A few yards farther on, and Marion came up to her. She was looking pale and ghastly; there were rings under her eyes; her nerves had had a terrible shock.

"I couldn't imagine where you had got to," she said. "I looked round, and you had disappeared. I feared you had been spirited away."

"By the cruel foe, Marion? One by one we go. It may be your turn next."

"Would to Heaven that it was!" Marion whispered vehemently. "A little time ago I fancied that I was strong enough to bear up against anything. Now I know what a feeble creature I am. Before this happened I would a thousand times have been the victim myself. And I—I—"

She paused, and beat the air impotently. Vera wondered. Could this really be the strong, self-reliant Marion, who had uplifted them in so many troubles?—this

the girl who always had a smile on her face and words of comfort on her lips? This was a weak, frightened creature, with eyes that were haunted.

"Be brave," said Vera, "and be your self. What should we do without you? Why, you are so full of remorse you might have been responsible for Geoffrey's death yourself."

Marion looked up quickly; and then her eyes fell.

"It is because I love him," she said.

"And I love him, too. But I try to be brave."

Marion was silent under the reproof. Vera was calm and collected. What a reaction there would be later, Marion thought.

"You have not given up all hope?" she asked.

"No, I cannot. It would be too cruel. I cannot imagine that anything really serious has happened to Geoffrey. I cannot feel anything for the present, save for you. And my heart is full for you, Marion."

"Aye," Marion said, drearily. "It need be."

Vera turned and walked swiftly across the sands. She wanted to be alone now that no danger threatened.

Then presently the moon rose and shone upon the people gathered on the fringe of the sea. To the impatient Geoffrey came Ralph Ravenspur with a cloak and slouch hat over his arm.

Chapter XLIV

3.

He entered as coolly and easily as if he had been doing this kind of thing all his life, as if he had the full use of his eyesight.

"I can't see you, but of course you are there," he said. "Tchigorsky sent me because he cannot come himself. The jade he calls his mistress has need of him. Muffle yourself and follow me. Not too closely."

Geoffrey was only too glad of the opportunity. He passed under the shadow of the rocks until he gained the path to the head of the cliffs, and here Ralph paused.

"We are safe now," he said. "You can remove your disguise and cross the terrace. There is not a living soul at the castle at present."

"All the servants are on the beach, then?"

"Every one of them, both male and female, which is a flattering testimony to your popularity, Geoffrey. I opine that they will be pleased to see you in the morning. By the way, have you concocted a plausible story to account for your escape?"

"I haven't," Geoffrey admitted, with a smile. "I preferred to leave it to the greater talents of Tchigorsky and yourself. I have no genius for fiction."

Ralph muttered that the matter might be safely left in their hands, and then they entered the deserted castle and made their way to Ralph's room. Here the two doors were closed and Ralph sat down silently over his pipe.

“Is anything going to happen?” Geoffrey asked.

“A great deal during the next hour or two,” Ralph replied. “But it is impossible to forecast, and you will see it all for yourself in good time. I can’t do anything until I have heard further from our friend Tchigorsky.”

Half an hour passed in dead silence, and then there was a rapping on the window. When the casement was thrown open, the head of Tchigorsky appeared. He was clad in Oriental robes, and had made his way upwards by climbing the thick ivy that grew on that side of the house. He nodded to Geoffrey.

“I told you we should meet again.” he said. “I have just ten minutes to spare. A cigarette, please.”

Geoffrey handed over the cigarette.

“Have you discovered all?” Ralph asked.

“I have discovered nothing,” Tchigorsky said calmly from behind the cloud of smoke. “At present I have not the remotest idea which way she will strike.”

“Ah! she is in one of her suspicious moods?”

“When she trusts nobody. Quite right. All I can tell you is that she is coming here presently. She is well aware that there is not a soul in the house. She knows that this state of things is likely to last for some time. She will come by-and-bye, and with her she will bring some great danger to the house of Ravenspur. What form that danger is to take I cannot say. But I shall find out.”

The last words came from Tchigorsky’s lips with a snap.

“But she will want confederates,” said Geoffrey.

“She may or she may not. She is a woman of infinite resource. Nobody knows what mischief she is capable of. If she brings me along I may be exceedingly useful; if she leaves me behind I shall be more usefully employed in going over her papers and documents. You see, I know the language. But be that as it may, this is going to be an eventful night.”

Tchigorsky finished his cigarette and rose to go. He had few instructions to leave behind him, and these few were of an exceedingly simple nature. All that Geoffrey and Ralph Ravenspur had to do was to watch. They were to keep their eyes open and be largely guided by events. And there were to be no lights.

Half an hour passed before Ralph rose and softly opened his door. For a little time he threw the casement open wide. As Geoffrey drew a match from his box Ralph laid a restraining hand on his arm.

“No more smoking,” he said. “I purposely opened the casement to sweeten the air of the room. My dear boy, you do not want to betray us with the smell of fresh tobacco. The enemy would take alarm at once.”

“I had forgotten,” Geoffrey murmured. “How stupid of me!”

Again silence and painful tension on the nerves. Presently below came the soft fall of a foot, and then a noise as if a human body had come in contact with some object in the dark. There was the scratch of a match, and a ball of flame flickered in ghastly fashion in the hall.

“The foe is here,” Ralph whispered. “Go and look over. Your rubber-soled boots are in the corner. Put them on.”

Geoffrey did as desired. He crept along the corridor until he could look down into the hall. There he saw a woman—a woman who wore short skirts and a

closely-fitting jacket. She had a small lantern in her hand, the light of which seemed to lower or heighten by pressing a stud.

Behind her came the two Orientals, who carried a small, but heavy brass bound box between them. This, at a sign from the woman, they deposited on the floor.

As far as Geoffrey could judge neither of these men was Tchigorsky. He could catch the sound of whispered conversation, but the words conveyed no meaning to his ears. The two discoursed in a language he did not understand.

A hand was laid on Geoffrey's arm. He turned to see Ralph by his side. The latter bent over the balustrade, listening with all his ears. Down below the brass box was being opened and the contents were placed upon the floor.

The contents looked like machinery, but it was machinery of a kind that Geoffrey had never seen before. There was a small disc of hammered copper, and to this was attached a number of what seemed to be indiarubber snakes. At a sign from the woman the two Asiatics picked up the box and its contents and started away towards the kitchen.

Noiseless as they were, Ralph heard them. He clutched his companion's arm.

"They have gone," he whispered. "In which direction?"

"They have moved off towards the kitchen," said Geoffrey.

"Good! This thing is turning out exactly as I expected. They had something with them?"

"Yes; a thing like a copper octopus with indiarubber tentacles. They have taken it with them. A most extraordinary affair."

"It will be more extraordinary still before it is finished," Ralph said grimly. "Follow them and report what you see. Take good care not to be seen. Unless I am mistaken they are going down to the vaults and are planning a coup to do for us all to-night."

Geoffrey crept silently, down the stairs. Then he made his way swiftly along the passages until he came to the cellars. Then the steady blowing of a current of fresh air told him that Ralph's suggestion was right. Down he went until he came to the channel leading to the vaults.

But he was cautious. He peeped down. Below him were three figures, and once more they had spread out their queer apparatus. By the side of it were two large, glass-stoppered bottles, such as one sees in a laboratory, receptacles for acids and the like. They were tightly tied over the stoppers.

The woman picked up one of them and removed the parchment. Before she drew the stopper she donned thick glasses and a mask for her face, the two Orientals doing the same. They were evidently dealing with some very dangerous poison.

The stopper was removed and a few spots of the acid dropped on the copper disc. A white smoke arose, which, small is it was, filled the air with a pungent odor. Almost immediately the acid was wiped off and the odor ceased. Only just a whiff of it reached Geoffrey's nose, but it turned him faint—giddy for an instant.

What was going to happen next.

Chapter XLV

Baffled.

Geoffrey had not long to wait. From where he was standing he could see down into the vault perfectly well. He would have been better satisfied had he understood what those people were talking about, but their words conveyed nothing to him.

On the floor of the vault the queer-looking machinery was spread out, and to the ends of the indiarubber tubes wires were attached. No sooner had this been accomplished than the woman, after giving some rapid instructions to her allies, left the vault. She was so quick that Geoffrey barely had time to conceal himself behind a pillar before she passed him.

The woman was masked and disguised beyond recognition, but Geoffrey had no need to be told who she was. He knew that he was in the presence of Mrs. May. And, despite his knowledge of her cleverness and resource, he found himself marvelling to see her display so fine a knowledge of the house.

The woman passed along, dragging a number of fine, light wires after her. The other ends of the wires were attached to the queer-looking apparatus in the vault.

Mrs. May went along the passages, along the corridor, and up the stairs as if she had been accustomed to the house all her life. Surely she must have been here many times before, or she would not have exhibited such fearless confidence. The idea of the black, gliding figure creeping about the house in the dead of night, filled Geoffrey with loathing.

All the same he did not neglect his opportunities. He followed swiftly and silently until he came to the main corridor on the first landing. Here, to his surprise the woman turned into one of the bedrooms, the room used by the head of the house. She closed the door behind her.

What to do next? But Geoffrey was not long in doubt. Ralph was standing by his side, a dark lantern in his hand.

“Where did she go?” he whispered.

“You heard her, then?” asked Geoffrey.

“Of course; I heard everything. I see with my ears. Naturally, you guessed who she was? But what room did she go into?”

“My grandfather’s.”

“So I expected. But she means to visit all the rooms in turn. You need not be afraid; she will be there for some minutes. What do you see outside?”

Geoffrey made a close examination with the lantern. “I see a tangle of small wires on the floor,” he said. “They come up from the vaults.”

“Where they are attached to a queer-looking instrument?”

“Yes, yes? I see you know all about it. One of the wires runs under the door into the room where Mrs. May is engaged.”

“And where she will be engaged for some time,” said Ralph. “Move that book-ladder and look over the fanlight.”

There were books on high shelves in the corridor, and a light librarian's ladder close at hand. Geoffrey propped this against the door and looked in through the open fanlight. All the bedroom doors had fanlights at Ravenspur.

The lantern inside was on the dressing-table, and standing on a chair by a fireplace, was Mrs. May. She had pinned the thin wire to the wall cunningly, and had turned the end of it into a plate that stood on the mantelpiece. From a flask she poured a little white powder into the plate.

When this was done she seemed to be satisfied. Geoffrey whipped the ladder away, and the woman emerged from the room. Once more she went along the corridor with firm, resolute step, and the air of one who knows what she is doing and has a definite object in view.

From one bedroom to another she went, leaving a wire in each until every room occupied by one of the Ravenspur family had been visited. Geoffrey's room was the last. When she had finished here, she took up a pair of scissors and tapped the wire. Outside the door Geoffrey and Ralph could hear the noise distinctly.

Ralph's jaws came together with a click.

"The key is outside your room door," he whispered. "Turn it."

Geoffrey wondered, but he hastened to comply. The key turned with an ease and silence that testified to the fact of its having been carefully oiled.

"What does it all mean?" Geoffrey whispered.

"She is going to test her machinery," said Ralph with a chuckle. "And she is going one step farther to her own destruction. Listen."

Again came the faint tap, and then down from far below the purring jar of electrical apparatus in motion. There was silence inside the room for a moment, and then Geoffrey saw the handle turn. It was turned softly at first, then more quickly, and finally it was tugged as an angry child snatches at a toy.

Ralph chuckled. The diabolical mirth seemed to come deep from his throat.

"She is trying to get out," Geoffrey whispered.

"Of course she is," Ralph replied. "But not quite yet,"

The lock was rattling loudly by this time; there was a half-angry, half frightened muttering from within. And then there came a long, piercing, wailing scream, as if of a woman in the last agony before death.

Geoffrey would have started back but Ralph restrained him.

"No, no," he whispered violently. "It is all right; everything is turning out splendidly."

"But she is a woman and in deadly peril, uncle."

"I know it, lad. Five minutes more and that fiend will be beyond further mischief. She has been trying the effect of her infernal contrivance and will be hoist with her own petard. She is scared to death. She imagines she has fastened herself in and can't get out."

"But this is murder," Geoffrey cried.

"I daresay some people would call it so," Ralph replied coolly. "As a matter of fact, there never could be homicide more justifiable than to let that woman perish there. Still, we are not going to do anything of the kind. When those cries cease, and you hear yonder wretch fall to the ground, then open the door and drag her out."

The cries were coming wildly from behind the door; there was a hammering on the panels. The cries rang through the house; they reached the Asiatics in the vaults, and the latter fled in terror into the night.

In spite of his strong nerves, Geoffrey shuddered. It was horrible to be alone in that grim house of tears, waiting in the darkness, opposed by grim horrors and, above all, to have that note of agony ringing in his ears.

Would it never stop? Would the time to act never come? Geoffrey would have interfered in spite of everything but for the fact that Ralph was gripping his shoulder in a grip that at any other time would have been painful.

Suddenly the noise ceased. There was a moan and the soft, crushing fall of a body. Ralph's face blazed up instantly.

"Now," he cried, "there is no time to be lost."

Geoffrey darted forward. He had the door opened in an instant. Mrs. May lay still and white on the floor. The atmosphere of the room seemed to have vanished. It was intolerable to breathe there; air there was none.

As the door fell back the room filled as with a sudden strong draught. Geoffrey dragged the unconscious figure into the corridor.

"Will she die?" he gasped.

"No; she will not die," Ralph said coolly. "Had I intended her to die I should not have allowed you to open the door. Pick her up and throw her on one of the beds in a spare room. She will require no attention but she will not attain consciousness for some hours. And after that, she will be useless for a day or two. You need not worry; our scheme is working out splendidly. Pick her up."

Ralph indicated her still figure with brutal indifference. He would have shown more consideration to a sick dog. Geoffrey complied, and presently made the woman as comfortable as circumstances allowed.

Geoffrey had hardly done so before there was a light footfall in the corridor, and Tchigorsky appeared, still in disguise.

"I gather that things are well," he said. "Just now I met that she-devil's accomplices fleeing as if the Father of Lies were behind them. She was trapped, eh?"

Ralph nodded and chuckled.

"In Geoffrey's room," he explained. "When she was testing her apparatus I had the key turned on her. And she could not get out. I let her remain there as long as I considered it safe to do so, and her yells must have alarmed her confederates. Probably they have fled, leaving things intact."

"Probably," said Tchigorsky. "I will go and see."

He was back again presently, a pleased expression on his face.

"Nothing has been touched," he said. "I have removed the wires, in case of danger. We have the lady more or less under our thumb."

"What was she doing?" Geoffrey asked.

"It is an appliance for exhausting air," Tchigorsky explained. "You take a powder and place it on a hot plate. Directly it begins to burn it draws up all the air. The thing has been known in the East for thousands of years. Mrs. May applied electricity to give her greater scope. A plate of the powder was to be heated in the room of everybody in the castle when asleep.

“A few minutes and the thing is done. Then the wires are withdrawn and gradually the different rooms fill with air again. The burnt powder leaves no trace. Then you are all found dead in your beds and nobody knows how it is done. The wires are easily drawn back to the battery, and the whole thing is destroyed.”

Geoffrey shuddered.

“What a fiend!”

Chapter XLVI

Nearing the End.

It was some time before any one spoke. Geoffrey was turning the matter over in his mind. He was still puzzled.

“I don’t understand it,” he said. “Of course, I follow all you say, and I see the nature of the plot intended to end us all at one fell swoop. But why do you want to have that woman under the roof?”

“Because as long as she is under the roof she is comparatively harmless,” Tchigorsky explained. “The princess is hot and vengeful and passionate, but she has her vein of caution and will take no unnecessary risks. She will be bewildered, and will not know whether she had been suspected or not. The more cordial you are to her, the more suspicious she will be. Of course, she will make up some plausible tale to account for her intrusion, and, of course, you must pretend to believe it. It will be impossible to move her for a day or two, and here I come in.”

“In what way?” Geoffrey asked.

“In the way of having a free hand,” Tchigorsky said, with a smile. “The princess will be cut off from her allies, and I shall be able to ransack her private papers for one thing.”

Geoffrey nodded. He began to see the force of Tchigorsky’s clever scheme. And then the cold solitude of the house struck him. For a moment he had forgotten all about the family still on the beach, and the agony they were suffering on his account.

“I suppose you can do no more tonight?” he asked.

“I am not so sure of that,” Tchigorsky said drily. “Meanwhile, I can safely rest for an hour or so. I am going to lie hidden in Ralph’s bedroom for the present and smoke his tobacco. Do you want anything?”

“I should like to relieve the minds of my friends,” said Geoffrey.

“Of course,” Tchigorsky responded. “Go at once. You were picked up by a passing boat—or yacht—that landed you at Manby. You walked back and when you got home to change your clothes you found the place deserted. Don’t say anything as to Mrs. May. Your Uncle Ralph will have that story to tell when you return. You are not to know anything about Mrs. May.”

“All right,” Geoffrey said, cheerfully. “Now I’ll be off?”

He made his way down the cliffs unseen. There were lanterns flitting about the shore; he could see the flash of Marion's white dress and Vera by her side. He came gently alongside them.

"Vera," he said. "What is all this about?"

Vera turned and gave a cry. She was acting her part as well as possible, and the cry seemed genuine. But the tears in her eyes were tears of thankfulness that the sufferings of those dear to her were ended. She clung to her lover; her lips pressed his.

Marion stood there white and still as a statue. The girl seemed to be frozen. Geoffrey's touch thawed her into life again.

"Geoffrey!" she screamed. "Geoffrey! Thank God! Thank God! Never again will I—"

With another scream that rang high and clear, the girl fell unconscious at his feet. He raised her up tenderly as the others came rushing forward. There was a babel of confused cries, hoarse cheers, and yells of delight. The villagers were running wild along the sands. Scores of men pressed eagerly round to shake Geoffrey's hand.

"I was picked up by a yacht," he said. "Of course I know there was foul play. I know all about the broken mast and the sawn oars. You may rest assured I will take more care another time. And I was—"

Geoffrey was going to say that he had been warned, but he checked himself in time. His progress towards home was more or less a royal one. It touched him to see how glad people were. He had not imagined a popularity like this.

Vera clung fondly to his arm; Rupert Ravenspur walked proudly on the other side. Not once had the old man showed the slightest sign of breaking down, but he came perilously near to it at the present time. Marion held to him trembling. She felt it almost impossible to drag herself along.

"You are quaking from head to foot," said Ravenspur.

"I am," Marion admitted. "And at the risk of increasing your displeasure I should say you are very little better, dear grandfather. I fear the shock of seeing Geoffrey after all this fearful suspense has been too much for you."

Ravenspur admitted the fact. He was glad to find himself at home again, glad to be rid of the rocking, cheering crowd outside, and glad to see Geoffrey opposite him. Marion, pale as death, had dropped into a chair.

"I am going to give you all some wine," said Geoffrey. "You need it. Please do not let us discuss my adventure any more. Let us drop the subject."

Ralph glided in feeling his way into the room. He congratulated Geoffrey as coolly as he would have done in the most trite circumstances. He was acting his part in his own wooden, stupid way.

"I also have had my adventures," he croaked.

"I hope the castle is all right," Ravenspur observed.

"The same idea occurred to me," Ralph went on. "One so afflicted as myself could not be of much service on the beach, so I came back to the castle. It occurred to me as possible that our enemy would take advantage of the place being deserted. So I passed the time wandering about the corridors.

“A little time ago I heard a violent commotion and screaming outside Geoffrey’s room. I got to the spot as soon as possible, but when I arrived the noise had ceased. Then I stumbled over the body of a woman.”

“Woman?” Ravenspur cried. “Impossible!”

“Not in the least,” Ralph said coolly. “I picked her up; she was unconscious. My medical knowledge, picked up in all parts of the world, told me that the woman was suffering from some physical shock. That she was not in any danger her steady pulse showed. I placed her on the bed in the blue room.”

“And there she is now?” Marion exclaimed.

“So far as I know,” Ralph replied. “What she was doing here I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“And you don’t know who she is?” Mrs. Gordon asked.

“How should I? I am blind. I should say that the woman was up to no good here; but I dare say it is possible that she has some decent excuse. On the other hand, she might be one of our deadly foes. Anyway, there she is, and there she is likely to be for some time to come.”

Marion rose to her feet.

“Uncle Ralph,” she said, “I feel that I could shake you. Have you no feeling.”

“We can’t all have your tender heart,” Ralph said meekly.

Marion ignored the compliment. She took up the decanter and poured out a glass of wine.

“I am going upstairs at once,” she said. “Enemy or no enemy, the poor creature cannot be neglected. You need not come, Vera.”

Vera, too, had risen to her feet. She was not going to be put aside.

“But I am coming,” she said. “I will not allow you to go up those stairs alone. And Geoffrey shall accompany us.”

Marion said no more. She seemed strangely anxious and restless.

Geoffrey followed with a lamp in his hand. Mrs. May lay quietly there, breathing regularly and apparently in a deep sleep.

Marion bent over the bed. As she did so she gasped and the color left her face. She fell away with a cry like fear.

“Oh!” she shuddered. “Oh! it is Mrs. May!”

Vera bent over the bed. She unfastened the dress at the throat.

“What does it matter?” she said. “I know you don’t like the woman, but she is suffering. Marion, where are your tender feelings?”

Marion said nothing. But she came directly to Vera’s side. And Geoffrey, glancing at Marion’s rigid white face, wondered what it all meant.

Chapter XLVII

Tchigorsky Further Explains.

“I don’t quite follow it yet,” said Geoffrey.

“And yet it is simple,” Tchigorsky replied. “Here is a form of electric battery in the vault connected by tiny wires to every sleeping chamber occupied by a Ravenspur. In each of these bedrooms a powder is deposited somewhere and the wire leads to it. At a certain time, when you are all asleep, the current is switched on, the powder destroyed without leaving the slightest trace, and in the morning you are all as dead as if you had been placed in a lethal chamber—as a matter of fact, they would have been lethal chambers.

“Almost directly, by means of the chimneys, etc., the rooms would begin to draw a fresh supply or air, and by the time you were discovered everything would be normal again. Then the battery would be removed and the wires withdrawn without even the trouble of entering the rooms to fetch them. Then exit the whole family of Ravenspur, leaving behind a greater mystery than ever. Now do you understand what it all means?”

Geoffrey nodded and shuddered.

“What do you propose to do?” he asked. “Leave the battery where it is, and—”

“Unless I am mistaken, the battery is removed already,” said the Russian.

He was correct. Investigation proved that the whole thing had been spirited away.

“As I expected,” Tchigorsky muttered. “Done from the vaults under the sea, doubtless. That woman’s servants keep very close to her. It is wonderful how they manage to slip about without being seen. They have ascertained that an accident has happened to their mistress, and they have removed signs of the conspiracy. But for the present they cannot remove their mistress.”

Tchigorsky chuckled as he spoke.

“You seem pleased over that,” said Geoffrey.

“Of course I am, my boy. It enables one to do a little burglary without the chance of being found out. And you are to assist me. But I am not going to start on my errand before midnight; so till then I shall stay here and smoke. At that hour you will please join me.”

“I am to accompany you, then?”

“Yes; you are going be my confederate in crime.”

Geoffrey joined the others downstairs. Delight and thankfulness were written on every face. Never had Geoffrey found his family so tender and loving.

Usually, Marion had had her feelings under control, but to-night it seemed as if she could not make enough of her cousin. She hung over him; she lingered near him until Vera laughingly proclaimed that jealousy was rendering her desperate.

“I cannot help it,” Marion said, half-tearfully. “I am so glad. And if you only knew—but that does not matter. I am beside myself with joy.”

“I suppose that woman upstairs is all right,” Ravenspur said coldly.

He was by no means pleased that Mrs. May should have intruded twice in that way. And each time there had been some accident. With so much sorrow weighing him down and with the shadow of further disaster ever haunting him, Ravenspur was naturally suspicious.

It seemed absurd no doubt, but that woman might be taking a hand against the family fortunes. The last occasion was bad enough, but this was many times worse. In the circumstances, as he pointed out, nothing could exceed the bad taste of this intrusion into a deserted house.

“She may not have known it,” Mrs. Gordon said quietly. “Who knows but that she had discovered some plot against us and had come to warn us? Perhaps the enemy divined her intentions—hence the accident.”

“But was it an accident?” Gordon asked.

“Something mysterious, like everything that occurs to us,” his wife replied. “At any rate, she is breathing regularly and quietly now, and her skin is moist and cool. Ralph said he had seen something like it in India before. He is convinced that she will be all right in the morning. Don’t be angry, father.”

“I will not forget what is due to my position and my hospitality, my dear,” he said. “After Geoffrey’s miraculous escape, after the heavy cloud of sorrow so unexpectedly raised. I cannot feel it in my heart to be angry with anybody. How did you manage to get away, Geoffrey?”

Geoffrey told his tale again. It was not nice to be compelled to invent facts in the face of an admiring family; but then the truth could not have been told without betraying Tchigorsky, and blowing all his delicate schemes to the winds. He was not sorry when he had finished.

Marion wiped the tears from her eyes.

“It was Providence,” she said. “Nothing more nor less.”

“Little doubt of it,” Gordon murmured. “Geoff, have you any suspicions?”

“I know who did it, if that is what you mean,” Geoffrey said, “and so does Marion.”

The girl started. Her nerves were in such a pitiable condition that any little thing set them vibrating like the strings of a rudely-handled harp.

“If I did I should have spoken,” she said.

“Then you have not guessed?” Geoffrey smiled. “The masts and the scull were sawn by a girl in a blue dress and red tam-o’-shanter cap. The girl who is so like—”

He did not complete the sentence; there was something in Marion’s speaking eyes that asked him not to do so. Why he could not tell; but there was nothing to be gained by what was less than a breach of confidence.

“What does it mean, Marion?” Ravenspur asked.

“Geoffrey and I saw such a girl not long before Geoff set out on his eventful voyage,” Marion explained quietly. All the fear had gone out of her eyes; she met the gaze of the speaker tranquilly. “She passed me as I was painting; I have been close to her once before. But I don’t understand why Geoff is so certain that the mysterious visitor tried to drown him.”

“I’ve no proof,” Geoffrey replied. “It is merely an instinct.”

As a matter of fact he had plenty of proof. Had he not seen the girl hastening away from his boat? Had he not seen her return after the boat had been beached and mourn over the wreck like some creature suffering from deep remorse?

But of this he could say nothing. To speak of it would be to betray the fact that Tchigorsky was still alive and active in pursuit of the foe.

“That woman can be found,” Ravenspur said sternly.

“I doubt it,” said Geoffrey. “She has a way of disappearing that is remarkable. You see her one moment and the next she has vanished. But I am certain that she is at the bottom of the mischief.”

And Geoffrey refused to say more. As a matter of fact, nobody seemed to care to hear anything further. They were worn out with anxiety and exertion. They had had little food that day; the weary hours on the beach had exhausted them.

"For the present we can rest and be thankful," Ravenspur said as he rose to go. "We can sleep with easy minds to-night."

They moved off after him, all but Geoffrey and Vera. Mrs. Gordon could still be heard moving about one of the drawing-rooms. Marion had slipped off unobserved. She hardly felt equal to bidding Geoffrey good-night. The tender smile was still on her face as she crept upstairs.

Then when she reached her room it faded away. She flung herself across the bed and burst into a passionate fit of weeping. And then gradually she sobbed herself into a heavy yet uneasy slumber.

"Well, I suppose I must go, too?" Vera said, tired out, yet reluctant to leave her lover. "Tell me what it means, Geoff?"

"Have I not already explained to you?"

"Yes; but I didn't believe one word of it," Vera replied. A kiss sufficed to wash the bitterness of the candor away. "I don't believe you were picked up by a yacht. I don't believe you were in any danger. I don't understand it."

"Then we are both in the same state of benighted ignorance," Geoffrey smiled. "You are right not to believe me, dearest, but I had to tell the story and I had to play a part. It is all in the desperate game we are playing against our secret foe. For the present I am a puppet in the hands of abler men than myself. What I am doing will go far to set us free later."

Vera sighed gently. She sidled closer to her lover. Mrs. Gordon was coming out of the drawing-room, a sign that Vera would have to go.

"I feel that I don't want to part with you again," she whispered, her eyes looking into his and her arm about him. "I feel as if I had nearly lost you. And if I did lose you, darling, what would become of me?"

Geoffrey kissed the quivering lips tenderly.

"Have no fear, sweetheart," he said; "all is coming right. See how those people have been frustrated over and over again. They have come with schemes worthy of Satan himself and yet they have failed. And it has been so arranged that those failures seem to be the result of vexatious accident. But they are not. And they will fail again and again until the net is around them and we shall be free. Darling, you are to sleep in peace to-night."

With a last fond embrace Vera slipped from her lover's side. She smiled at him brightly from the doorway and was gone. Geoffrey lighted a cigarette that presently dropped from his fingers and his head fell forward.

He started suddenly; the cigarette smelt pungently as it singed the carpet. Somebody was whispering his name; somebody was calling him from the stairs. Then he recognised Ralph's croaking voice.

"Tchigorsky," he muttered sleepily. "I had forgotten that Tchigorsky wanted me."

Chapter XLVIII

More from the Past.

Tchigorsky was waiting. The room was pregnant with the perfume of Turkish cigarettes and coffee. Ralph handed a cup to his nephew.

"Drink that," he said. "You want something to keep you awake."

Geoffrey accepted the coffee gratefully. It had the desired effect. He felt the clouds lifting from his brain and the drowsy heaviness of limb leaving him.

"Are you coming with us?" he asked.

Ralph shook his head. There was a strange gleam on his face.

"I stay here," he said. "You are going to be busy, but I also have much to do. Don't be concerned for me. Blind as I am, I am capable of taking care of myself. I shall have a deal to tell you in the morning."

A minute or two later, and the two conspirators slipped away. It struck Geoffrey as strange that they should not leave the house in the usual way, but Tchigorsky grimly explained that he much preferred using the ivy outside Ralph's window.

"Always be on the safe side," Tchigorsky muttered. "Come along."

Geoffrey followed. Where Tchigorsky could go he felt competent to follow. They reached the ground in safety, and later were in the road. The moon had gone, and it was intensely dark, but Geoffrey knew the way perfectly.

"Straight to Jessop's farm?" he asked.

"As far as the lawn," Tchigorsky replied. "It will be a good hour yet before we can venture to carry out our burglary. I can run no risks until I know that those two Asiatics are out of the way. What time is it?"

"About ten minutes to twelve."

Tchigorsky muttered that the time was not quite suitable for him. He drew a watch from his pocket; there was a stifled whirr of machinery, and the repeater's rapid pulse beat twelve with the silvery chime of a quarter after the hour.

"You are wrong," he said. "You see it is between a quarter and half-past twelve. We will lie on Jessop's lawn till one o'clock and then all will be safe."

They lay there waiting for the time to pass. The minutes seemed to be weighted. "Tell me some more of your Lassa adventures," Geoffrey asked.

"Very well," Tchigorsky replied. "Where did I leave off? Ah! we had just been tortured on that awful grid. And we had been offered our lives on condition that we consented to be hopeless idiots for the rest of our days.

"Well we were not going to live in those circumstances, you may be sure. For the next few days we were left to our own resources in a dark dungeon with the huge rats and vermin for company. We were half-starved into the bargain, and when we were brought into the light once more they naturally expected submission.

"But they didn't get it. They did not realise the stuff we were made of. And they had no idea we were armed. We had our revolvers, and concealed in our pockets were some fifty rounds of ammunition. If the worst came to the worst we should not die without a struggle.

"Well, there was a huge palaver over us before the priests in the big temple, with Zara on her throne, and a fine impressive scene it was, or, at least, it would have been had we not been so interested as to our own immediate future. At any rate, it was a comfort to know that there were no more tortures for the present, for

nothing of the kind was to be seen. We were going to die; we could read our sentence in the eyes of the priests long before the elaborate mummery was over.

"I tell you it seemed hard to perish like that just at the time when we had penetrated nearly all the secrets we had come in search of. And it was no less hard to know that if the princess had postponed her visit another week she would have been too late. By that time we should have left Lassa far behind.

"The trial, or ceremony, or whatever you like to call it, came to an end at length, and then we were brought up to the throne of the princess. You know the woman; you have looked upon the beauty and fascination of her face; but you have no idea how different she was in the homes of her people. She looked a real queen, a queen from head to foot. We stood awed before her.

"'You have been offered terms and refused them,' she said. 'It is now too late.'

"'We could not trust you,' I replied boldly; we had nothing to gain by politeness. 'Better anything than the living death you offered us. And we can only die once.'

"The princess smiled in her bloodcurdling way.

"'You do not know what you are talking about,' she said. 'Ah! you will find out when you come to walk the Black Valley!'

"She gave a sign, and we were led away unbound. A quaint, wailing music filled the air; the priests were singing our funeral song. I never fully appreciated the refined cruelty of reading the burial service to a criminal on his way to the scaffold till then. It makes me shudder to think of it even now.

"They led us out into the open air, still crooning that dirge. They brought us at length to the head of a great valley between huge towering mountains, as if the Alps had been sliced in two and a narrow passage made between them. At the head of this passage was a door let into the cliff and down through this door they thrust us. It was dark inside. For the first part of the way, till we reached the floor of the valley, we were to be accompanied by four Priests, a delicate attention to prevent us from breaking our necks before we reached the bottom. But our guides did not mean us to perish so mercifully.

"'Listen to me,' Zara cried; 'listen for the last time. You are going into the Black Valley; of its horrors and dangers you know nothing as yet. But you will soon learn. Take comfort in the fact that there is an exit at the far end if you can find it. When you are out of the exit you are free. Thousands have walked this valley, and over their dry bones you will make your way. Out of these thousands one man escaped. Perhaps you will be as fortunate. Farewell!'

"The door clanged behind us, and we were alone with the priests. We could not see; we could only feel our way down those awful cliffs, where one false step would have smashed us to pieces. But the priests never hesitated. Down, down we went until we reached the bottom. There we could just see dimly.

"'You could guide us through?' I asked.

"One of the priests nodded. He could save us if he liked. Not that I was going to waste my breath by asking him. They were priests of a minor degree; there were thousands of them about the temple, all alike as peas in a pod. If these men failed to return they would never be missed. A desperate resolution came to me. In a few English words I conveyed it to Ralph Ravenspur.

"We still had a priest on either side of us. At a given signal we produced our revolvers, and before the priests had the remotest idea what had happened, two of

them were dead on the ground, shot through the brain. When the thousand and one echoes died away we each had our man by the throat. What did we care if the plot were discovered or not! We were both desperate.

"'Listen, dog!' I cried. 'You have seen your companions perish. If you would escape a similar death, you will bear us to safety. You shall walk ten paces in front, and if you try to evade us you die, for our weapons carry farther than you can run in the space of two minutes. Well, are you going to convey us to a place of safety, or shall we shoot you like the others?'"

Tchigorsky paused and pulled at his watch. He drew back the catch, and the rapid little pulse beat one.

Then he rose to his feet.

"To be continued in our next," he said. "The time has come to act. Follow me and betray no surprise at anything you may see or hear."

"You can rely upon me," Geoffrey whispered. "Lead on."

Chapter XLIX

Ralph Takes Charge.

The troubled house had fallen asleep at last. They were all used to the swooping horrors; they could recall the black times spread out over the weary years; they could vividly recollect how one trouble after another had happened.

And it had been an eventful day. For the last few hours they had lived a fresh tragedy. True, the tragedy itself had been averted, but for some time there had been the agony of the real thing. The Ravenspurs, exhausted by the flood of emotion, had been glad of rest.

They were presumably asleep now, all but Ralph. Long after deep silence had fallen on the house he sat alone in the darkness. The glow of his pipe just touched his inscrutable features and a faint halo of light played about his grizzled head. A mouse nibbling behind the panels sounded clear as the crack of a pistol shot. The big stable clock boomed two.

Ralph laid aside his pipe and crept to the door. He opened it silently, and passed into the corridor. A cat could not have made less noise. Yet he moved swiftly and confidently, as one who has eyes to see familiar ground. He came at length to the room where Mrs. May was lying.

She had been made fairly comfortable. Her dress had been loosened at the throat, but she still wore the clothes in which she had been dressed at the time of her accident.

There was a light in the room. He could tell that by the saffron glow which touched lightly on his sightless eyeballs. He knew the disposition of the room as well as if he could see it. He felt his way across until he came to the bed on which the woman lay.

His hand touched her throat—a gentle touch—yet his fingers crooked and a murderous desire blossomed like a rose in his heart. Nobody was about, and

nobody would know. Who would connect the poor blind man with the deed? Why not end her life now?

"Far better," Ralph muttered. "It would have been no crime to shoot her like a dog. Yet fancy hanging for such a creature as that!"

The grim humor of the suggestion restored Ralph to himself. His relaxed fingers just touched the cold throat and face. He could hear the sound of regular breathing. From a tiny phial he took two or three drops of some dark cordial and brushed them over the woman's rigid lips. She stirred faintly.

"Just as well to hasten events," he muttered. "One cannot afford to play with the thing."

He replaced the bottle in his pocket. He drew himself up listening. Other ears could not have heard a sound. Ralph, however, could plainly hear footsteps. But how near they were he could not tell. His brows contracted with annoyance.

"So soon," he muttered. "I did not expect this."

He dropped down between the bed and the wall. Then he crawled under the deep valance. He had not long to wait. Somebody had crept into the room, somebody light of foot and light of body who crossed to the bed. And this somebody shook the sleeping figure with passionate force.

"Wake up!" a voice said. "Oh! will you never wake up?"

"What is the matter?" she muttered. "Where am I?"

"Here, in the castle. Don't you remember?"

Ralph was listening intently.

"I begin to recollect. There was an accident; the door refused to open; I fought for my life as long as I could before the fumes overcame me, and I gave myself up for lost. Oh! it was something to remember, Marion," muttered Mrs. May.

Marion, for it was she, made no reply. She was crying quietly.

"What is the matter with the girl?" the woman asked irritably.

"Oh! It is good for you to ask me that question, after all the bitter trouble and humiliation you have put upon me. Get up and follow me."

"I cannot. The thing is impossible. You forget that I have been almost dead. My limbs are paralysed. I shall not be able to walk for at least two days. I must remain here like a dog. But there is no hurry. What happened?"

"I can't tell; I don't know. You were found in the corridor, I am told, insensible. When they came back to the castle they found you lying here. They had all been down on the beach searching for Geoffrey."

"I hope they found him," she said.

"Oh, yes, they found him," Marion said quietly.

"Drowned, with a placid smile on his face, after the fashion of the novel?"

"No, very much alive. You failed. Geoffrey Ravenspur is here safe and sound. On my knees I have thanked God for it."

The woman muttered something that the listener failed to catch. She seemed to be suppressing a tendency to a violent outburst.

"I will not fail next time," she said. "And you are a love-sick, soft-hearted, sentimental fool. All this time I have to remain here. But, at any rate, I have you to do my bidding. Put your hand in my breast-pocket and you will find a key."

"Well, what am I to do with it?"

“You are to go to my rooms at Jessop’s farm at once. They will be fast asleep, so that you need not be afraid. Jessop’s people have the slumber that comes of a tired body and an easy conscience. But there are foes about, and it is not well to trust to anybody.

“If I am to remain here for a day or two I must have certain things. In my sitting-room, by the side of the fireplace, is a black iron box. Open it with the key I have given you, and bring the casket to me. You can get into my sitting-room by gently raising the window, which is not fastened. They are so honest in these parts that people don’t fasten their windows. Now go.”

“You are sure you cannot get up?”

“Certain. I have been drugged, and it will be some time before I am able to get about. That is why I am anxious to have the box. Young Ravenspur would never have got away had he had no friends to assist him or a simple fool to give him warning.”

“The fool you speak of does not regret it.”

“Perhaps not. How did he escape?”

“In the simplest possible way. He was picked up by a passing yacht.”

“Well, accidents will happen,” the woman muttered. “Now do my bidding. The heavy drugged sleep is coming on me again, and I shall not be able to keep my eyes open much longer. Go at once.”

As Marion crept away Ralph could catch her heavy, indrawn breaths, and the sobs that seemed to burst from her overcharged heart. Then he knew that the woman was asleep again.

A minute or two later and he was standing in the hall. He waited in the shadow, silent and patient. The stairs creaked slightly, and a stealthy footstep came creeping down.

Chapter L

A Kind Uncle.

Ralph crept towards the door. Marion came close to him, her hands fumbling nervously with the bolts and bars. Some of the bars were heavy, and Marion was fearful lest they should fall with a clang and betray her.

Ralph stretched out his hand and drew back a bolt.

“Allow me to assist you,” he said. “I am used to this kind of work.”

A scream rose to Marion’s lips, but she suppressed it. The effort set her trembling from head to foot. Yet it seemed to her that there was no cause to be frightened, for she had never heard Ralph’s voice so kind before.

“Uncle!” she stammered, “what are you doing here?”

By way of reply Ralph opened the door. He gave the sign for Marion to precede him, and then followed her out into the night. The heavy door closed behind him.

“I might with equal justice ask you the same question,” he said. “Nay, more; because you are merely a young girl and I am a man. And you know I don’t sleep

like most virtuous people. I suffer from insomnia and never sleep for long anywhere. Perhaps I am like the cat who prowls about all night and slumbers in the daytime. But where are you going?"

"Uncle Ralph, I cannot tell you. It is a secret. If you knew everything you would pity me."

There was a deepening ring in Marion's voice. Ralph caressed her hand tenderly.

"Don't trouble," he said. "I know."

"You know where I am going? You—you know?"

"Certainly I do. I know everything, my dear."

"Not everything, uncle. Not of my connection with that woman, for instance."

"Indeed I do, Marion."

"You are aware of our relationship! You know that?"

"My dear child, I have known it for years. But your secret is safe with me. I am not going to betray you. Could I have the heart to do so after all you have done for my family, Angel Marion?"

He repeated the last words over and over again in a low, caressing voice, pressing the girl's hand softly as he did so. Even then Marion was not sure whether he was in earnest or whether he was grimly ironical.

"I never thought of this," Marion murmured.

"Perhaps not," Ralph replied. "Mrs. May is a bad woman, Marion."

"The worst in the world," Marion replied. "You only know her as Mrs. May?"

"I only know her as she is, dear. And yet I feel that in some vague way she is mixed up with our family misfortunes. Oh, if I could only see, if I could only use my eyes. Then I might know that woman still better."

Marion shuddered at the steely, murderous tones. Ralph patted her hand reassuringly.

"But, you need not be afraid," he said. "You are all right—the brightest angel in the world. You are torn by conflicting emotions; you fancy your duty lies in certain directions, and you are troubled over it. And yet it will come right in the end, Marion. We did not lose Geoffrey after all."

"Thank God, no. And yet there is plenty of time."

"There is ample time for the right as well as the wrong, Marion. But do not let us talk of the past any more, my dear. I am not going to pry into your secrets, and I know how far to trust you. Let me walk part of the way with you. I can wait by the barn till you return."

Marion raised no objection. It was the dead of night now, and there was no fear of meeting anybody. Yet Marion started uneasily as Ralph began to whistle. She ventured to suggest that the noise was not prudent.

"Perhaps you are right,'" Ralph said amicably. "At any rate I will wait here till your return. You have not far to go, of course?"

"I have a very little way to go, uncle. I am going to Jessop's farms."

Ralph nodded. The farm loomed up not far off. As Marion darted off Ralph lighted his pipe and whistled again. Something moved in the bushes.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Tchigorsky and Geoffrey were nearing the window. Tchigorsky moved on resolutely and confidently with the air of a man who is sure of his ground. He

put up his hand and fumbled for the catch. It gave at once, and the pair of burglars slipped quietly into the room.

"We shall be safe," he said, as he proceeded to strike a match. "It is just as well to take every precaution. What would the estimable Jessop say if he could see into his parlor?"

Geoffrey smiled.

"He'd be astonished," he said; "a little dismayed, too. But he would say nothing so long as I am here. Jessop would stand on his head for me."

The strong rays of the lamp lighted up the room. There were flowers everywhere, dainty china on the table full of blooms, bowls filled with choicest fruits. Wines sparkled in the crystal goblets on the sideboard, a silver cigarette box was conspicuous, and on a safe lay an object to which Tchigorsky called his companion's attention.

"What do you make that out to be?" he asked.

Geoffrey picked up the drapery. On the top of it lay something red, with a feather in it. It appeared to be a costume of some kind. As Geoffrey held it aloft, a light gradually broke in upon him.

"Well," Tchigorsky said, "have you solved the problem?"

"I have," Geoffrey replied. "It is the blue dress and tam-o'-shanter hat which have placed so conspicuous a part lately. But what brings them here? Has Mrs. May a companion hidden somewhere, a companion who might be Marion's sister?"

"Seems like it," Tchigorsky said, with a dry smile. "But I am not going to enlighten you any farther on that question at present. Mrs. May and the girl in the blue dress are two separate people, anyway."

"You forget that I have seen them together," said Geoffrey.

"I had forgotten that. Well, it will not be long now before the identity of the lady in the smart dress and coquettish hat is established. Meanwhile, we came here in search of something far more important than a woman's costume. Help me to turn out all those drawers, and be careful to replace everything exactly as you find it. We have a good three hours before us, and much depends upon the result of our search. Keep a keen eye open for papers in any language that is unfamiliar to you."

For an hour the search proceeded, and yet nothing came to light. There were plenty of bills, most of them emanating from West End establishments—accounts for dresses and flowers, boxes for theatres, and the like, but nothing more.

Tchigorsky glanced keenly round the room.

"I am afraid we shall be compelled to show our hand," he said. "Mrs. May is so clever that I half-expected to find private papers in some simple place, while an examination of her safe would disclose nothing. She has not anticipated burglary, and what I am looking for is in the safe."

"Dare you open it?" Geoffrey asked.

"And show my hand, you mean? I fancy so. We are so near success now that it really does not matter. Put the safe on the table," replied Tchigorsky.

The heavy iron box slipped as Geoffrey raised it and clanged on the floor. An exclamation of anger and annoyance came from Tchigorsky, and an apology from the younger man. They both stood upright for a few minutes, listening intently.

But the people upstairs were sleeping the sleep of the just. There came no answering sound.

"Blessings upon the pure air and the high conscience that hold these people," Tchigorsky muttered more amicably. "It's all right, my young friend. Hoist up the box, and let us see if my steel jemmy will have any effect. I would rather have had the key. It is never well to betray your plans if you can—"

The speaker paused. From outside a little way off there arose a long, shrill scream, the cry of a woman in distress. The sound set Geoffrey's blood leaping; he pushed for the window, but Tchigorsky detained him.

"Where are you going?" he asked, sternly.

"Outside," Geoffrey exclaimed. "A woman is there. She asks for assistance. Can you stand there calmly and see—"

"See you making an ass of yourself, eh? My dear boy, on my word of honor there is no woman in danger yonder. In a measure I am glad to hear that cry, though it proves to me that our allies have not been so artistic over their work as they might have been. You will not hear that cry again."

"Perhaps not," Geoffrey said, reassured considerably by Tchigorsky's placid manner; "but I hear footsteps outside."

Tchigorsky smiled. He had taken some steel bits from his pocket, but he replaced them again.

"If they are, then they are the footsteps of a friend," he said. "This being so, there will be no need for me to give you lessons in the way how not to open a safe. Are you right? It seems as if the window were opening."

The window was indeed opening. It moved half an inch, and then there was a "hist," and something clanged on the floor.

Tchigorsky took the matter as coolly as if it had all been arranged beforehand. He did not move as the window closed again and stealthy footsteps outside moved away.

"Is it all right?" Geoffrey asked.

Tchigorsky smiled broadly.

"Splendid!" he said. "It could not have been better. My boy, this is the night's work which is going to crown our endeavors. Yonder we have the proofs, and here we have the means of getting them."

He picked up the metallic object from the floor. He fitted it to the lock of the safe, and instantly a mass of queer things was discovered. Tchigorsky's eyes gleamed as he saw this; they positively flamed as he turned out a lot of papers.

At the bottom was a book in metal covers. As Tchigorsky fluttered it open a cry broke from him.

"Found!" he exclaimed. "Found! We have them in the hollow of our hands!"

Chapter LI

„What Does That Mean?"

With less courage than she usually felt, Marion went on her way. Perhaps there was no more miserable being in England at that moment. It is hard to play a double part, hard to be thrust one way by cruel circumstances when the heart and soul are crying out to go the other.

This was Marion's position. And whichever way she went she was destined to be equally unhappy and miserable. She had to help her relations; she had to try to shield that infamous woman at the same time.

And now the great secret of her life had come to light. That was the bitterest trial of all. Vera had discovered that Marion loved Geoffrey. Ralph Ravenspur had made the same discovery long ago, but it did not matter so very much about him; Vera was different.

And here she was in the dead of night carrying out the errand of the deadliest foe the house of Ravenspur had ever known. She was half-inclined to throw the whole thing to the winds, to disappear and never return again. Why should she—

She stopped. Something was stirring in the bushes on either side of her. Perhaps it was a rabbit or a fox. Probably somebody had dogged her footsteps.

"Who are you?" Marion cried. "Speak, or I call for help."

The threat was futile, considering the time of night. The bushes parted and two men appeared. Marion gave one loud scream, but before she could repeat the cry a hand was laid on her lips.

Whoever they were, they were not unduly rough. The hand that stayed further clamor was hard, but it was not cruel.

"You are not to cry out again," a voice whispered. "I will not injure you if you promise not to call out."

Marion indicated that she would comply with this suggestion. Immediately the hand fell from her lips.

"This is an outrage," she said. "Who are you?"

"That is beside the point," was the reply. "It is an outrage, but we are not going to treat you badly. We are unfortunately compelled to keep you some four-and-twenty hours from the custody of your friends, but you may rest assured that you will be treated with every consideration."

"I am your prisoner, then?"

"Since you like to put it in that way—yes."

Marion was properly indignant. She pointed out that the course these men were pursuing was a criminal one, and that it was likely to lead them into trouble.

But she might have been speaking to the winds. If she could only see these people! She had not the remotest idea what they were like. The man who spoke was evidently a gentleman; his companion seemed like a working man—a sailor by his walk. And yet it was impossible to see the faces of either.

"Where are you going to take me?" Marion asked.

"We are going to conduct you to one of the caves," was the reply. "Unfortunately no house is available for our purpose, or we should not put you to this inconvenience. But we have made every preparation for your comfort, and you are not likely to suffer for want of food or anything of that kind. And I pledge you my word of honor that you shall not be detained a minute beyond the specified time."

He touched Marion on the arm to indicate a forward movement.

"I suppose it is of no use to ask your name," Marion said coldly.

“I have no objection,” said the other. “The time is coming when it will be necessary to speak very plainly indeed. My name is George Abell, and I am secretary to Dr. Sergius Tchigorsky. My friend’s name is Elphick. He was at one time a servant in the employ of one of your family.”

“Tchigorsky?” Marion cried. “But he is dead.”

“That seems to be the popular impression,” Abell said gravely.

The words seemed to strike a chill in Marion. She began to comprehend that all her sacrifices had been made in vain.

“Tchigorsky not dead?” she said hoarsely.

“No,” said Abell. “I saw him a little time ago. It will perhaps not surprise you to hear that I am acting under his orders.”

“But he could not know that I—”

“Dr. Tchigorsky seems to divine matters. He seems to know what people will do almost by instinct. He is a wonderful man, and does wonderful things. But I cannot tell you any more; I am merely acting under orders.”

He indicated the way, and Marion proceeded without further protest. She felt like a condemned criminal when the sentence is pronounced. Certain things were coming to an end. A long period of suspense and anxiety was nearly finished. How it was going to end Marion neither knew nor cared. But she did know that the woman who was known as Mrs. May was doomed.

Not another word passed until the foot of the cliffs was reached. It was no easy matter to get down in the dark, but it was managed at length.

It was near the lonely spot where Geoffrey’s stranded boat had been found. For days together nobody came here, and Marion could not console herself with the fact that she would be rescued. Not that she much cared; indeed, it was a matter of indifference to her what happened.

Abell was polite and attentive. He indicated a pile of rugs and wraps; if Miss Ravenspur wanted anything she had only to call out, and it would be supplied immediately.

“I want nothing but rest,” Marion said wearily. “I am tired out. I feel as if I could sleep for a thousand years. I am so exhausted mentally that I have no astonishment to find myself in this strange situation.”

Abell bowed and retired. The night was warm, and the cave, being above any, even the high spring tides, was dry. Marion flung herself down upon the pile of wraps and almost at once fell fast asleep. When she came to herself again the sun was shining high. Outside Abell was pacing the sands. Marion called to him.

“I want some breakfast,” she said, “and then I should like to have a talk with you. If only I had a looking-glass.”

“You don’t need one,” Abell said respectfully, if admiringly. “Still, that has been thought of. There is one in the corner.”

Marion smiled despite herself. She found the glass, and propped it up before her. There was no cause for alarm. She looked as neat and fresh as if she had just made a due and elaborate toilette. Geoffrey was fond of saying that after a football match Marion would have remained as neat and tidy as ever. She ate her breakfast heartily—good tea, with eggs, and bread and butter and strawberries.

“Do you want anything more?” asked Abell, looking in.

“Nothing, except my liberty,” Marion replied. “You may come in and smoke if you like. How long are you going to detain me here?”

“Four-and-twenty hours.”

“But I shall be missed. They will search for me. By this time of course, they are hunting all over the place for me. They will come here—”

“I think not,” Abell said politely. “It is too near home. Nobody would dream of looking for you in a cave close to the castle. We thought of all that. They will not look for you for other reasons.”

Marion glanced swiftly at the speaker.

“How could you prevent them?” she demanded.

Abell puffed drily at his cigarette. He smiled pleasantly.

“There are many ways,” he said. “You do not come down to breakfast. They begin to be alarmed at your absence. Somebody goes to your room and finds there a note addressed to your grandfather. That note is apparently in your handwriting. It contains a few lines to the effect that you have made a great discovery. You have gone at once to follow it up. The family are not to be alarmed if you do not return till very late. When you come back you hope to have a joyful revelation for everybody.”

Marion smiled in reply. Abell seemed to be so sure of his ground.

“What you outline means forgery,” she said.

“So I presume,” Abell replied coolly. “But forgery is so simple nowadays with the aid of the camera. After what I have told you, you will be able to see that our scheme has been thoughtfully worked out.”

“And when I come back do I bring a joyful confession with me?”

Abell looked steadily at the speaker. There was something in the expression of his eyes that caused her to drop hers.

“That depends entirely upon yourself,” he murmured. “One thing you may rely upon—the confession will be made and the clouds rolled away. It is only a matter of hours now. Surely you do not need to be told why you are detained?”

For some reason best known to herself Marion did not need to be told. It was a long time before she spoke again. She ought to have been angry with this man; she ought to have turned from him with indignation; but she did nothing of the kind. And if she had, her indignation would have been wasted. “You are in Dr. Tchigorsky’s confidence?” she asked.

Abell shook his head with a smile.

“I know a great deal about him,” he said. “I help him in his experiments. But as to being in his confidence—no. I don’t suppose any man in the world enjoys that, unless it is your Uncle Ralph.”

Marion started. In that moment many things became clear to her. Hitherto she had regarded Ralph Ravenspur as anything but a man to be dreaded or feared. Now she knew better. Why had she not thought of this before?

“They are great friends?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. They have been all over the world together. And they have been in places which they do not mention to anybody.”

Chapter LII

„As Proof of Holy Writ.“

Tchigorsky hung over the papers before him as if inspired. There was not much, apparently, in the book with the metal clasps, but that little seemed to be fascinating to a degree. The Russian turned it over till he came to the end.

“You appear to be satisfied,” Geoffrey said.

“Satisfied is a poor word to express my feelings,” Tchigorsky replied. He stretched himself; he drew a deep breath like one who has been under water.

“I have practically everything here in this diary,” he said. “It is written in a language you would fail to understand; but it is all like print to me. Everything is traced down from the first of the family catastrophes to the last attempt by means of the bees. There are letters from Lassa containing instructions for the preparation of certain drugs and poisons; in fact, here is everything.”

“So that we are rid of our foes at last?”

“Not quite. The princess is cunning. We shall have to extract a confession from her; we shall have to get her and her slaves together. It is all a matter of hours, but we shall have to be circumspect. If the woman finds she is baffled, she may be capable of a bitter revenge to finish with.”

“What are you going to do?” Geoffrey asked.

“We are going back to the castle the same way we came,” Tchigorsky exclaimed. “We are going to show your uncle Ralph our find. For the present it is not expedient that Sergius Tchigorsky should come to life again.”

The box was locked once more and replaced, and then the two burglars crept from the house. They had not disturbed anybody, for the upper windows of the farmhouse were all in darkness.

A brisk walk brought them to the castle. Upstairs a dim light was still burning in Ralph Ravenspur’s window. The light flared up at the signal, and a few minutes later the two were seated round the lamp, while the window was darkened again.

Ralph sat stolidly smoking as if he had not moved for hours. He evinced not the slightest curiosity as to the success of his companions. Tchigorsky smote him on the back with unwonted hilarity.

“So you have been successful?” he croaked.

“Oh, you have guessed that!” Tchigorsky cried.

“It was a mere matter of time,” Ralph replied. “It was bound to come, I knew that from the first day I got here.”

“All very well,” Tchigorsky muttered; “but it was only a ‘matter of time’ till the Ravenspurs were wiped out root and branch.”

“You knew the day you got here?” Geoffrey exclaimed.

Ralph turned his inscrutable face to the speaker.

“I did, lad,” he said. “I came home to ascertain how the thing was worked. Before I slept the first night under the old roof I knew the truth. And I came in time—guided by the hand of Providence—to save the first of a fresh series of tragedies.

“You wonder why I did not speak; you have asked me before why I did not proclaim my knowledge. And I replied that the whole world would have laughed at me; you would have been the first to deride me, and the assassin would have been warned. I kept my counsel; I worked on like a mole in the dark; and when I had something to go on, Tchigorsky came. Before you are many hours older the miscreants will stand confessed.”

Tchigorsky nodded approval. He was deftly rolling a cigarette between his long fingers.

“Ralph is right,” he said. “We have only to fire the mine now. By the way, Ralph, you were clever to get that key.”

“Easy enough,” Ralph croaked. “I knew the woman would be uneasy about her papers, so I gave her a touch of the cordial on her lips and brought her to her senses. A certain messenger who shall be nameless was sent off with the key. The messenger was detained, is still detained according to arrangements, and her pocket was picked. Elphick dropped back, and gave me the key, which I passed on to you.”

Geoffrey followed in some bewilderment The messenger business was all strange to him.

“Did you know that diary existed?” he asked.

“Of course I did,” Ralph growled. “In a measure, I might say that I had seen it. Many a time at night have I lain in a flower-bed under that woman’s window and heard her reading from the diary or writing in it. That is why I asked no questions when you came in. I knew you had been successful. And now, Princess Zara, it is my turn.”

Ralph’s voice dropped to a whisper, an intense burning whisper of hate and vengeance. He rose and paced the room like a caged bird.

“What will be her fate?” asked Geoffrey.

“Burn her, slay her, hang her,” Ralph cried. “No death is too painful, too loathsome for a creature like that. I could forgive her fanatical cruelty; I could forgive the way she fought for her creed. But when it comes to those allied by ties—”

The speaker paused and sat down.

“Who talks too fast says too much,” he remarked, sententiously.

“What is the next move?” Geoffrey asked.

“Bed, I should say,” Tchigorsky suggested drily. “As far as one can judge we are likely to have a busy day before us to-morrow. And don’t you be surprised at anything you see or hear. It will be all in the day’s work, as you English say. I am going to lie up in hiding here, but I shall turn up when the time comes. Good-night.”

It was late when Geoffrey rose the following day, and the family had long had breakfast when he came downstairs. Most of the family were still in the breakfast-room or on the terrace in the sunshine.

“How is the visitor?” he asked.

“Mrs. May seems very queer,” Mrs. Gordon explained. “She complains of a sort of paralysis in her lower limbs. At the same time she refuses to see a doctor, saying that she has had something of the kind before.”

“Does she account for her presence here?” said Geoffrey.

“Oh, yes. Of course she had heard you were missing and been informed that everybody from the castle was on the beach. It was getting dark when she saw two strange, suspicious-looking men coming this way. She felt sure that they had designs on the house and followed them. She tried to get somebody to assist her, but could not see a soul anywhere. Then she put on that queer dress and came on here.

“The two men entered the castle and she crept after them. They discovered her, and one of them gave her a blow on the head that stunned her. When she came to her senses again she was lying in bed. Wasn’t it plucky of her?”

“Very,” Geoffrey said drily; “but where is Marion?”

“Marion, like yourself, seems to be lazily inclined to-day. It is so very unlike her; indeed, I fear the poor child is anything but well. Those quiet people always feel the most, and poor Marion was greatly upset yesterday.”

Vera came in at the same moment. She had a merry word or two for Geoffrey as to his late appearance. She had not seen Marion as yet. “Run up to to her room, there is a dear girl,” said Geoffrey. “This sort of thing is not like Marion; I fear something has happened to her.”

“I wish you would,” Ravenspur observed.

Vera disappeared, only to come back presently with the information that Marion’s room was empty, and that her bed had not been occupied. She held a little envelope in her hand.

“I can only find this,” she said.

Ravenspur snatched the letter and tore it open.

“Extraordinary!” he exclaimed. “Marion says she has found a clue to the troubles and is following it up at once. If she does not come back till late we are not to worry about her. Strange! But I have every confidence in the girl.”

“May she not come to harm!” Vera said fervently.

“Oh, I hope not,” Mrs. Gordon cried. “But will this mystery and misery never end?”

Chapter LIII

A Little Light.

Mrs. May, Princess Zara, the brilliant mystery who yielded so great an influence over the destiny of the house of Ravenspur, lay on her bed smiling faintly in the face of Mrs. Gordon Ravenspur, who stood regarding her with friendly solicitude. Mrs. Gordon had no suspicions whatever; she would have trusted any one. All the lessons of all the years had taught her no prudence in that direction. A kind word or an appeal for assistance always disarmed Mrs. Gordon.

“I hope you are comfortable,” she said.

Mrs. May smiled faintly. She appeared a trifle embarrassed. She was acting her part beautifully as usual. Her audacity and assurance had carried her through great difficulties, and she had confidence in the future.

“In my body, perfectly,” she said. “But I am so uneasy in my mind.”

“And you will not have a doctor?”

“Not for worlds. There is nothing the matter with me. I have suffered like this before. I have a weak heart, you know, and excitement troubles me thus. But I don’t want a doctor.”

“Then why should you worry?” Mrs Gordon asked.

“I am ashamed of myself,” the woman confessed with a laugh. “I have been wondering what you must think about me. This is the second time you have had to detain me as an involuntary guest under your roof. The first time I was the victim of an idle curiosity; the second time I did try to do you a good turn. I hope you will remember that.”

“It was kind and courageous of you,” Mrs. Gordon said warmly. “How many people would have done as much for strangers! And please do not talk about it any more or I shall be distressed.”

Mrs. May was by no means sorry to change the conversation. A thousand questions trembled on her lips, but she restrained them. She was burning to know certain things, but the mere mention of such matters might have aroused suspicions in a far simpler mind than that of Mrs. Gordon.

“So long as you are all well it does not matter,” she said. “This afternoon I shall make an effort to get up. Meanwhile, I will not keep you from your household duties. Could I see one of those charming girls, Miss Vera or Marion? I have taken such a fancy to them.”

“Vera shall come presently; she has gone to the village,” Mrs. Gordon explained. As to Marion she could say nothing.

“Marion has been an enigma to us lately,” she explained. “I need not tell you of the dark shadows hanging over this unhappy house, or how near we have been to the solution of the mystery on more than one occasion. And now Marion has had an idea, queer child.

“She went out, presumably last night, leaving a note to say she had really got on the track at last, and that we were not to worry about her even if she did not return to-day. So strange of Marion.”

Mrs. May had turned her face away. She was fearful lest the other, prattling on in her innocent way, should see the rage and terror and despair of her features.

“Queer!” she murmured hoarsely. “Did she write to you?”

“No, to my husband’s father. Her note was given to me. Even now I don’t know what to make of it. Would you like to see the letter? You are so clever that you may understand it better than I do.”

“I should like to see the letter.”

It was an effort almost beyond the speaker’s powers to keep her voice steady. Even then the words sounded in her ears as if they came from somebody else. From her pocket Mrs. Gordon produced the letter. Mrs. May appeared to regard it languidly.

“If I knew the girl better I could tell you,” she said. “It sounds sincere. But my head is beginning to ache again.”

Mrs. Gordon was all solicitude. She drew down the blinds, and produced eau de Cologne, and fanned the brow of the sufferer after drenching it with the spirit.

Mrs. May smiled languidly, but gratefully. At the same time it was all she could do to keep her hands from clutching the other by the throat and screaming out that unless she was left alone murder would be done.

"Now I really can leave you," Mrs. Gordon said.

"It would be the greatest kindness," the invalid murmured gratefully.

The door softly closed; Mrs. May struggled to a sitting position. Her eyes were gleaming, yet a hard despair was on her face. She ought to be up and doing, but her lower limbs refused their office.

"A forgery," she said between her teeth. "Marion, never wrote that letter. If they were not blind they could see that for themselves. Marion has been decoyed away; and if so, somebody has that key. If I only knew. Tchigorsky is dead and Ralph Ravenspur is an idiot. Who, then, is the prime mover in this business?"

The woman did not know, and for the life of her she could not guess. Tchigorsky was out of the way—dead and buried. Ralph Ravenspur and Geoffrey were antagonists not worthy of a second thought. But somebody was moving, and that somebody a skilled and vigorous foe.

For once the arch-conspirator was baffled. The foe had the enormous knowledge of knowing his quarry, while the quarry had not the least notion where or how to look for the hunter. And the fish was fast to the line. Unless it got away at once the landing net would be applied; then there would be an end of all things.

But she could not move; she could do nothing but lie there gasping in impotent rage. There was only one person in the world who could help her now, and that was Marion. And where was she? Only the man on the other side of the chess-board knew that.

She wished she knew; oh! she wished she knew a score of things. Did the people of the castle suspect her? Hardly that, or Mrs. Gordon had not been so friendly.

What had become of the coat and glass mask she was wearing at the time things went wrong in Geoffrey Ravenspur's room? Had her subordinates heard her cry? Had they fled, or had they been taken? If they had fled, had they removed the instruments with them?

Mrs. May would have given five years of her life for enlightenment on these vital questions. Even she could not read the past and solve the unseen.

Tears of impotent rage and fury rose to her eyes. While she was lying there wasting the diamond minutes the foe was at work. At any time that foe might come down with the most overwhelming proofs and crush her. Marion had been spirited away. Why? So that the key of the safe might be stolen and used to advantage.

Once more the woman tried to raise herself from the bed. It was useless. She slipped the bedclothes into her mouth to stifle the cries that rose to her lips. She was huddled under them when the door opened and Vera stepped in.

"Did you call out?" she asked. "I was passing your door and fancied I heard a cry. Are you still suffering from a headache?"

Mrs. May's first impulse was to order the girl away. Then an idea came to her.

"The headache is gone," she said sweetly. "It was just a twinge of neuralgia. I wonder if you would do me a favor?"

"Certainly."

“Then I wish you would get me some paper and envelopes. I have a note to write. There is a child in the village I am fond of. She comes and sits in the tangle at the bottom of the Jessops’ garden and talks to me. I am afraid she thinks more of my chocolates than me, but that is a detail.”

“You want to write the child a note? How sweet of you!”

“Oh, no,” Mrs. May said. She was going to embark on a dangerous effort, and was not quite certain as yet. But desperate diseases require desperate remedies. “It is nothing. And I don’t want anybody to know.”

“I am sure you can trust to me.”

“Of course I can, my dear child. And I will. Please get me the materials.”

Vera brought the paper essentials. With a smile on her face Mrs. May wrote the letter. Inside the envelope she placed something she had taken from the bosom of her dress.

“A cake of chocolate,” she explained, smilingly. “See, I do not address the envelope, but place on it this funny sign that looks like an intoxicated problem in Euclid. The child will understand. And now I am going to ask you to do me a favor. Will you please take the letter without letting anybody know what you are doing, and put it at the foot of the big elder in the tangle? I dare say it sounds very stupid of me, but I don’t want the child to be disappointed.”

Vera professed herself ready and also to be charmed with the idea. She would go at once, she said, and Mrs. May raised no obstacle. At the end of the corridor Vera was confronted with her Uncle Ralph. He held out his hand.

“I was listening,” he said. “I knew beyond all doubt that something of the kind would be attempted. I want that letter.”

“But uncle, I promised—”

“It matters nothing what you promised. It is of vital importance that the inside of that letter should be seen. Chocolate for a child indeed! Death to us all, rather. You are going to give me that letter, and I am going to open it. Afterwards it shall be sealed again, and you shall convey it to its destination. The letter!”

Dazed and bewildered, Vera handed it to him. It was not a nice thing to do, but then, nice methods were not for Mrs. May. Ralph grasped the letter and made off towards his room.

“Wait here,” he said. “I shall not be a few minutes. I am merely going to steam that envelope open and master the contents. Don’t go away.”

Vera nodded. She was too astonished for words; not that she felt compunction any longer. Presently Ralph returned.

“There you are, my child,” he said. “If I seemed harsh to you, forgive me. It is no time for courtesies. You can take the letter now and deliver it. It has been a good and great discovery for us.”

Chapter LIV

Exit the Asiatics.

Tchigorsky, Ralph Ravenspur, and Geoffrey sat smoking in the blind man's room. It was late the same afternoon, and from the window could be heard the thunder of the incoming tide. Tchigorsky appeared to be in excellent spirits, puffed his cigarette with gusto, and came out in the new role of a raconteur.

"We have them all now," he said. "To-day will settle everything. It was a pretty idea of Ralph's to hang about the corridor under the impression that the woman would try to send some kind of message to her familiars. Real genius, I call it."

"Not a bit of it," Ralph said, doggedly. "Pshaw, a child would have done the same. The woman was bound to try to send a letter. She lies there helpless, but knows that somebody is moving in her tracks. And, to add to her suspense, she hasn't an idea who is following her up.

"Don't you see she is in the dark? Don't you understand that she suspects she has been trapped? She wants to know what we think about her; she wants to know all about her infernal apparatus. She wants her information all at one fell swoop. And when she found that Marion was missing, she felt certain that her time was near.'"

"What is her hold over Marion?" Geoffrey asked.

"And why has Marion gone away?" Tchigorsky said evasively. "We shall come to a full understanding about that presently. Let us begin to unravel the skein from the start. I read that letter which Ralph gave to me, the letter which by this time is in the hands of that woman's familiars. They have instructions to come to the castle at dusk, and enter it by way of the vaults. When the family are at dinner the Orientals will make their way up to their mistress."

"But can they?" Geoffrey asked.

"Of course they can. Many a night have they been here. But we have already stopped any danger that way by locking the door of the vault, the one below sea level. Then we shall go down the cliffs presently and take the chaps like rats in a trap. They will be handed over to the police because the time has come when we can afford to show our hands. The end is very near."

"But the evidence against Mrs. May?" Geoffrey suggested.

Tchigorsky tapped his breast-pocket significantly.

"You have forgotten the diary," he said "I have evidence enough here to hang that vile wretch over and over again. I have evidence enough to place in the hands of the Government which will convince those gentry in the temples beyond Lassa that they had better be content to leave us alone in future unless they desire to have their temples blown about their ears. This diary clinches the whole business. The house of Ravenspur is free."

"God grant that it may be so," Geoffrey said fervently. "We have only to wait till dusk. Tell me the rest of your adventures in the Black Valley."

Tchigorsky nodded, as he proceeded to make a fresh cigarette.

"There is not much more to tell," he said. "Some day, when I have more leisure on my hands. I will give the whole business, chapter and verse. I have only told you enough for you to know the class of foe you have to deal with.

"Well, as I told you, we shot two of the priests whose business it was to guide our stumbling feet to the bottom and then leave us there. We knew that these men would never be missed, so that we hadn't much anxiety on that score. The others, despite their sacred calling, were just as anxious to live as anybody else.

“To prevent any chance of escape, we took off our flowing robes, tore them into strips, and bound our guides to ourselves. It was a good thing we did so, for before long, we plunged into darkness so thick that its velvety softness seemed to suffocate us.

“You will hardly believe me, but for two whole days and nights we stumbled on in that awful darkness without food or rest, except now and again when we fell exhausted. All that time we could see nothing, but there were awful noises from unseen animals, roars and yells and cries of pain.

“Loathsome, greasy reptiles were under our feet, the clammy rocks seemed to be alive with them. Yet they did us no harm; indeed, their sole object seemed to be to get out of our way. Sometimes great eyes gleamed at us, but those eyes were ever filled with a terror greater than our own.

“After a bit this sense of fear passed away. Had we been alone, had we possessed no hope of ultimate salvation, the unseen horrors of the place would have driven us mad. We should have wandered on until we had dropped hopelessly insane and perished. Even a man utterly devoid of imagination could not have fought off the mad terror of it all. As for me, I will never forget it.”

Tchigorsky paused and wiped his forehead. Glancing at Ralph, Geoffrey could see that the latter was trembling like a leaf.

“We came to the end of it at length,” Tchigorsky went on. “We came to light and a long desolate valley whence we proceeded into an arid desert. Here we found our latitude and dismissed our guides. We ought to have shot them, but we refrained. It would have saved a deal of trouble. They were not less dangerous than mad dogs.

“We got into communication with our guides and servants in a day or two, and there ended the first and most thrilling volume of our adventures. How the Princess Zara has persecuted us ever since you know. And how we are going to turn the table on that fiend of a woman you also know.”

There was a long silence after Tchigorsky had finished and dusk began to fall. Geoffrey looked out of the window towards the sea. Suddenly he started.

“Blobber Rock,” he gasped. “Covered! Not a vestige of it to be seen! It is high spring tide to-day, the highest of the month, and I had forgotten all about it.”

“What difference does it make?” Tchigorsky asked.

“It fills the underground caves,” Geoffrey cried. “We have locked the doors of the lower vault, and in that vault are the two Asiatics waiting the orders of their mistress. A spring tide fills that vault with water. If those men got that letter, as they are pretty sure to have done by this time, then they are dead men. Once they get into the cave the tide would cut them off, and they would be drowned like rats in a sewer. Of course, they would have no idea the vault was closed to them, and—”

“Quite right,” Tchigorsky interrupted. “I never thought of that. And I had no knowledge of the state of the tide. And there are other caves where—”

He was going to say where Marion is, but paused. Ralph seemed to divine what was in his mind. The reply seemed incontinent, but Tchigorsky understood.

“All the other caves are practically beyond high-water mark,” he said. “What Geoffrey says is correct, and our forgetfulness has saved the hangman a job. But wouldn’t it be well to make sure?”

Tchigorsky was of that opinion.

"No need to alarm the household," he said. "Geoffrey shall procure a lantern, and I will come and assist in the search. I don't want to be seen just yet; but it really does not much matter, as there is no need for further concealment. If these men are drowned, they are drowned, and there is an end of the matter. In any case, we have the chief culprit by the heels."

It was possible, after all, to reach the vaults without being seen. Geoffrey procured a lantern and the party set out. When they were at the bottom of the steps they could hear the sea slashing and beating on the walls and sides of the vault. A great wave slipped up as the door opened.

Geoffrey bent down with the lantern in his hand. For some time he searched the boiling spume without success.

"Can you see anything?" asked Tchigorsky.

"Nothing whatever," said Geoffrey. "It is possible that they might not—, Ah!"

He shuddered as he raised the light. The spume ceased to boil for a moment, then a stiff, rigid hand crept horribly from the flood. A brown sodden face followed. There lay one of the Asiatics past the power of further harm.

"You have seen one," Tchigorsky shouted, "and there is the other."

Another face came up like a repulsive picture on a screen. A minute later and the two bodies were dripping on the steps of the vault.

Chapter LV

A Shock for the Princess.

It was not a pleasant task, but it had to be done. Fortunately it was possible to do everything discreetly and in order, for the vaults were large, and there was not the slightest chance that any of the household would come near.

The bodies were laid out there, and the key turned upon them. Geoffrey looked at his companions, and inquired what was to be done next.

"Inform the head of the house and send for the police," Tchigorsky said; "so far as I can see, it will be impossible to keep the matter a secret. Nor are we to blame. Those men came here for no good purpose, and we took steps to prevent them from entering the house.

"Unfortunately we forgot there would be an exceptionally high tide to-day, and consequently they have paid the penalty of their folly. But we can't bury these two fellows as we did the others."

"Hadn't we better search them?" Ralph suggested. "They came in response to the note sent them by their mistress. The note was opened and read. One of them is sure to have the letter on his person."

"Then let the police find it," Tchigorsky said promptly. "It will be the link in the evidence that we require. When you and I come to tell our story, Ralph, and the police find that letter, the net around Princess Zara will be complete. I have only to produce that diary and the case is finished."

Ralph nodded approval. Five minutes later and the head of the house, seated over a book in the library, was exceedingly astonished to see Ralph and Geoffrey, followed by Tchigorsky, enter the room.

He swept a keen glance over their faces; he saw at once they had news of grave import for him.

"I do not understand," he said. "Dr. Tchigorsky, I am amazed. I was under the impression that you were dead and buried."

"Other people shared the same opinion, sir," Tchigorsky said coolly. "The great misfortune of another man was my golden opportunity. It was necessary for certain people to regard me as dead—your enemies particularly. But perhaps I had better explain."

"It would be as well," Ravenspur murmured.

Tchigorsky proceeded to clear the mystery of Voski's death. He had to tell the whole story, beginning at Lassa and going on to the end. Ravenspur listened with the air of a man who dreams. To a man used all his life to the quietude of an English shire, it seemed impossible to believe that such things could be. And why should these people persecute him? Why should they come here? What did those men mean by drowning themselves in the vaults?

"They came here at the instigation of Mrs. May," Tchigorsky said.

"But I don't see how that lady comes to be in it at all."

"You will in a minute," said Tchigorsky grimly. "You will when I tell you that Mrs. May and Princess Zara are one and the same person." Ravenspur gasped. The bare idea of having such a woman under his roof filled him with horror. Even yet he could not understand his danger.

"But why does she come?" he demanded. "For revenge on you two?"

"Oh, no. My being here was a mere coincidence. Of course, the princess would have removed me sooner or later. Ralph, strange to say, she does not recognise at all, possibly because he has disguised himself with such simple cleverness. Princess Zara came here to destroy your family."

"In the name of Heaven, why?"

"Partly for revenge, partly for money. I told you all about her husband, who was an English officer. I told you why she had married him. When she discovered the papers she wanted, then she killed him and returned to her own people, giving out that she and her husband had perished up country in a fearful cholera epidemic. She wanted money. Why not kill off her husband's family one by one so that finally the estates should come to her? Mr. Ravenspur, surely you have guessed who was the English officer Princess Zara married?"

Ravenspur staggered back as before a heavy blow. The illuminating flash almost stunned him. He fell gasping into a chair.

"My son Jasper," he said hoarsely. "That fiend is his widow."

"And Marion's mother," Ralph croaked.

Geoffrey was almost as much astonished as his grandfather. He wondered why he had not seen all this before. Once explained, the problem was ridiculously simple. Ravenspur covered his face with his hands.

"Marion must not know," he said. "It would kill her."

"She knows already," Tchigorsky said. "That woman has great influence over her child. And the idea was for the child to get everything. The others were to be killed

off until she was the only one left. With this large fortune at command, Zara meant to be another Queen of Sheba. And she would have succeeded, too."

Ravenspur shuddered. He was torn by conflicting emotions. Perhaps tenderness and sympathy for Marion were uppermost. How much did she know? How much had she guessed? Was she entirely in the dark as to her mother's machinations, or had she come resolved to protect the relatives as much as possible?

Ravenspur poured out these questions one after another. Tchigorsky could or would say nothing to relieve the other's feelings on these points.

"What you ask has nothing to do with the case," he said. "I have proved to you, I am prepared to prove in any court of law, how your family has been destroyed, and who is the author of the mischief.

"She is under your roof, where she is powerless to move. Her two confederates lie dead in the vaults yonder. I have already explained to you how it came about that the princess is here and how her infernal apparatus failed. It now remains to call in the police."

"There will be a fearful scandal," Ravenspur groaned.

Tchigorsky glanced at him impatiently. The cosmopolitan knew a great many things that were sealed books to Ravenspur—in point of knowledge it was as a child alongside a great master; but Tchigorsky knew nothing of the family pride.

"Which will be forgotten in a week," he said emphatically. "And when the thing is over you will be free again. You cannot realise what that means as yet."

"No," Ravenspur said. "I cannot."

"Nevertheless, you can see for yourself that what I say is a fact," Tchigorsky resumed. "And as a county magistrate and a deputy-lieutenant, you would hardly venture to suggest that we should bury those bodies and say nothing to anybody about it?"

Ravenspur nodded approval. A few minutes later a groom was carrying a note to the police inspector at Alton. Ravenspur turned to Tchigorsky with a manner more genial than he usually assumed.

"I have forgotten to thank you," he said. "And you, Ralph, have saved the house. If you can forget the past—"

He said no more, but his hand went out. Ralph seemed to divine it and pressed it closely. There was no word uttered on either side. But they both understood, and Ralph smiled. Geoffrey had never seen his uncle smile before. The expression of his face was genial, almost handsome. His wooden look had utterly disappeared, and nobody ever saw it again. The transformation of Ralph Ravenspur was not the least wonderful incident of the whole mysterious affair.

The door opened, and Vera came lightly into the room.

"What does all this mystery mean?" she asked. "Geoffrey you are—Dr. Tchigorsky!"

The last words came with a scream that might have been heard all over the house. Tchigorsky closed the door and proceeded rapidly to explain. But it was not the full explanation he had given to the others. There was time enough for that.

Vera was too bewildered to ask questions. At a sign from Geoffrey she slipped from the room. Then she recollected that she had come down stairs on an errand of mercy. She had promised to get a cup of tea for the woman whom she still knew

as Mrs. May. She procured the tea from the drawing-room, and in a dazed kind of state made her way up the stairs again.

Mrs. May was sitting up in bed. There was a pink spot on either cheek, and her dark eyes were blazing.

"I hope nothing is wrong," she said. "It might have been my fancy, but it seemed to me that I heard you call Tchigorsky's name at the top of your voice."

The suggestion was made with a fervent earnestness that the woman could not repress. But Vera did not notice it.

"I did," she said. "I walked into the library, hearing voices there, and in a chair Dr. Tchigorsky was seated. No wonder that I cried out. It was a fearful shock. And when he began to talk I could not believe the evidence of my senses."

"Then who was it that was buried?"

The woman asked the question mechanically. She knew perfectly well what the reply would be; she knew that she had been discovered at last, and that the murder of Voski had been turned to good purpose by Tchigorsky. And she knew now who her new ally, Ben Heer, really was.

"Dr. Voski," Vera explained. "I have been hearing all about Lassa and a certain Princess Zara, who seems to be a dreadful wretch. But I fear that I am exciting you. And you haven't drunk your tea."

The woman gulped down her tea and then fell back on her bed, closing her eyes. She wanted to be alone, to have time to think. Danger had threatened her before, but not living, palpitating peril like this. Vera crept away, and the woman rose again, but she could not get out of her bed.

Passionate, angry tears filled her eyes.

"That man has beaten me," she groaned. "It is finished for good and all. But their revenge will not be of long duration."

Chapter LVI

Marion Comes Back.

The police had more or less taken possession of Ravenspur. They were everywhere asking questions that Tchigorsky took upon himself to answer.

As he had expected, the note carried by Vera and deposited in the farmhouse garden had been found on one of the bodies. The inspector of police was an intelligent man, and he fell in with everything that Tchigorsky suggested.

"Of course you can't read this book," said the Russian, as he handed over the fateful diary for safe custody; "But there are one or two Oriental scholars in London who will bear out my testimony. Have you any doubt?"

"Personally not in the least," the inspector replied. "You say it is impossible for that woman to get away?"

"Absolutely impossible. She is safe for days."

"Then in that case there is no need to arrest her. That will have to come after the inquest on these men, which we shall hold to-morrow. And what a sensation

the case will make! If I had read this thing in a book I should have laughed at it. And now we must have a thorough search for those electrical appliances."

It was long past dinner-time before the police investigations were finished. Aided by Tchigorsky a vast amount of mechanical appliances was found. Including the apparatus that was to do so much harm to the Ravenspurs, and which had ended in wrecking the schemes of their arch-enemy.

"Inquest at ten to-morrow, sir," the inspector remarked to Ravenspur. "I am very sorry, but we shall not trouble you more than we can help."

Ravenspur shook his head sadly. He was not particularly versed in the ways of the law, but he could see a long case ahead; and he was beginning to worry about Marion. It was nearly ten o'clock now, and the girl had not returned.

It would be a sad home-coming for her, but they would do all they could for her. Everybody appeared to be duly sympathetic except Ralph, who said nothing. Tchigorsky seemed to have obliterated himself entirely.

Geoffrey had retired to the billiard-room, where Vera followed him. They started a game, but their nerves were in no condition to finish it. Cues were flung down, and the lovers stood before the fireplace.

"What are you thinking about?" Geoffrey asked.

Vera looked up dreamingly. She touched Geoffrey's cheek caressingly. She looked like one who is happy and yet at the same time ashamed of her own happiness.

"Of many things; pleasant and otherwise," she said. "I am still utterly in the dark myself, but those who know tell me that the shadow has lifted for ever. That in itself is so great a joy that I dare not let my mind dwell upon it as yet. To think that we may part and meet again, to think—But I dare not let my mind dwell upon that. But what has Mrs. May to do with it?"

Vera was not behind the scenes as yet. Still, within a few hours the thing must come out. What the family regarded as a nurse had been procured for the invalid, a nurse who really was a female warder in disguise, and Ravenspur had sternly given orders that nobody was to go near that room. He vouchsafed no reason why; he gave the order, and it was obeyed.

Then Geoffrey told Vera everything. He went through the whole story from the very beginning. Vera listened as one in a dream. Such wickedness was beyond her comprehension. Awful as the cloud was that had long hung over the house of Ravenspur, Vera had not imagined it to be lined with such depravity as this.

"And so that inhuman wretch is Marion's mother?" said Vera. "The child of a creature who deliberately murdered her husband and tried to destroy his family so that she could get everything into her hands! No wonder that Marion has been a changed creature since Mrs. May has been about! How I pity her anguish and condition of mind! But had Marion a sister?"

"Not that I ever heard of. Why?"

"I was thinking of that other girl, the girl so like Marion that you were talking about just now. What has become of her?"

Geoffrey shook his head. He had forgotten that most mysterious personage. It was more than likely, he explained, that Tchigorsky would know. Not that it much mattered. The two were silent for some little time, then a peal of laughter from the drawing-room caused them to smile.

“My mother,” said Vera. “I have not heard her laugh like that for years. Does it not seem funny to realise that before long we shall be laughing and chatting and moving with the world once more, Geoff? I should like to leave Ravenspur and have a long, long holiday on the Continent.”

Geoffrey stooped and kissed her.

“So you shall, my sweet,” he said. “We can be married now. And when we come back to Ravenspur it will be the dear old home I recollect in my childhood days. Vera, you and I shall be the happiest couple in the world.”

They went back to the drawing-room again. Here the elders were conversing quietly yet happily. There was an air of cheerful gaiety upon them that the house had not known for many a long day.

Gordon Ravenspur was impressing upon his father the necessity of looking more sharply after the shooting. The head of the family had before him some plans of new farm buildings.

It was marvellous what a change the last few hours had wrought. And the author of all the sorrow and anguish was upstairs guarded by eyes that never tired.

“How bright and cheerful you look,” Vera said. “It only wants one thing to make the picture complete. You can guess, dear grandfather.”

“Marion,” Ravenspur said. “Marion, of course.”

“She will come back,” Ralph murmured. “Marion will return. We know now that no harm could come to the girl. I should not wonder if she were not on her way home this very moment.”

Half an hour passed, an hour elapsed, and yet no Marion. They were all getting uneasy but Ralph, who sat doggedly in his chair. Then there was a commotion outside, the door opened, and Marion came in.

She looked pale and uneasy. She glanced from one to the other with frightened eyes. It was easy to see that she was greatly moved and, moreover, was not sure as to the warmth of her reception. But she might have made her mind easy on that score. All rose to welcome her.

“My dear, dear child,” Vera cried. “Where have you been?”

Vera fluttered forward, and took off Marion’s cloak. All seemed to be delighted. Marion dropped into a chair with quivering smile. Ralph had felt his way across to her, and stood by the side of her chair.

“I fancied I made a discovery,” she said. “It occurred to me perhaps—But don’t let us talk about myself. Has anything happened here?”

“Much,” Ralph cried. “Great things. The mystery is solved.”

“Solved?” Marion gasped. “You have found the culprit?”

“The culprit is in the house. She is Mrs. May. I prefer to call her Princess Zara; and yet again I might call her Mrs. Ravenspur, wife of the late Jasper Ravenspur. Marion, we have found your mother.”

Marion said nothing. Her head had fallen forward and she sat swaying in her chair. There was a hard yet pleading look in her eyes. Ralph bent down and drew her none too tenderly to her feet.

“The she-wolf is here, the cub is here,” he cried. “Are you going to speak, or shall I tell the story? Speak, or let me do so.”

Ravenspur sprang forward angrily.

“What are you doing?” he cried “To lay hands on that angel—”

“Aye,” said Ralph, “an angel truly, but a fallen one—Lucifer in the dust!”

Chapter LVII

Hand and Foot.

What did it mean? Why was there all this commotion in the house? And why did everybody leave her so severely alone? These were the questions that Princess Zara, otherwise Mrs. May, otherwise Mrs. Jasper Ravenspur, asked herself. And why had Marion not returned?

Oh! it was bitter to lie there fettered hand and foot the very moment when activity and cunning and action were most imperatively needed. And Tchigorsky was not dead. How she had been tricked and fooled!

Fate had played against her. Who could have anticipated that Voski would have come to Ravenspur and met his death there! By this time the sham Ben Heer had all necessary proofs in his hands.

The door opened, and a resolute-looking woman came in. Her garb was something of the hospital type, yet more severe and plainer. She came in and took her place with the air of one who watches a prisoner.

“I do not require your services,” the adventuress said coldly.

“It is immaterial, madam,” was the equally cold reply. “I am sent here to do my duty whether you require my services or not.”

“Indeed! Am I to regard myself as a prisoner, then?”

The other bowed. The bolt had fallen. There was nothing for it but to submit quietly. By this time Tchigorsky’s proofs were in possession of the police. The prisoner smiled grimly as she thought how she could escape her foes yet.

“What is the confusion in the house?” she asked. “What is your name?”

“My name is Symonds. I was fetched here by the inspector of police. The bodies of two Asiatics have been found drowned in the vaults, and they are getting ready for the inquest to-morrow.”

Once again the defeated murderess smiled. Fate was all against her. Those men had come to do her bidding, and had perished. Doubtless the note sent by Vera Ravenspur would be found on one of them, and this would be no more than another link in the long chain.

She tried to rise, but she could not. She lay on the bed fully dressed, her brain was as quick and as clear as ever, but the paralysis in the lower limbs fettered her. A blind fury shook her for the moment.

If she had only been free to move she would have triumphed even yet. Tchigorsky might have been a clever man, but she would have shown him that he was no match for her. And now she had walked into the trap he had laid for her. Doubtless she had been watched into the castle; doubtless the enemy had seen her lay those wires, and had arranged to give her a taste of that deadly stuff she had prepared for others. Then Marion had been spirited away, and the key of the

safe taken from her. Subsequently Tchigorsky had ransacked the box. Oh! she saw it all.

The family of Ravenspur saw it all by this time, too. She was no longer a guest in the house of Ravenspur, but a prisoner in charge of a female warder. In a day or two she would be cast into prison. In due course she would undergo her trial and finally be hanged by the neck until she were dead.

It was this last thought that caused her to smile. She was too clever a woman not to accept the inevitable. A great many people in her position would have protested and lied and blustered. She saw the folly of it.

"I should like to see Mr. Ravenspur," she said. "Will you tell him so? You need not fear. I am helpless. I could not move."

Mrs. Symonds stepped into the corridor and gave the message to a passing servant. After a time a slow step came shuffling along up the stairs. It was Ralph, who presently came into the room.

"You can leave us for a little time," he said.

Symonds discreetly disappeared. She passed into the corridor. The woman in the bed opened her mouth to speak, but stopped in astonishment. Ralph's glasses were gone, and the smooth unguents had disappeared from his face. Those cruel criss-cross lines stood out with startling distinctness.

"You wanted to see my father?" he said. "My father declines to see you under any circumstances. Perhaps I shall do as well."

"You—you are one of the men I saw at Lassa."

The words came from the woman's lips with a gasp. She had never been so astonished in all her life.

"Yes; I was the other one," Ralph said coolly. "I had to disguise myself when I found out you were in England. There is no longer any need for disguise. I hope you are delighted to see me, my dear sister-in-law?"

"Oh! so you know that also?"

"You may take it for granted that I know everything."

There was a long pause before the woman spoke again.

"I need not ask what opinion you have formed of me?"

"You are perhaps the most depraved wretch who ever drew the breath of life," said Ralph, slowly and without emotion. "To your ambition and what you call your religion you are prepared to sacrifice everything. You deliberately murdered the man who loved you."

"Your brother Jasper. I admit it. Perhaps you will find it impossible to believe that I loved him? But I did with my whole heart and soul. I loved him, and I killed him. Does it not sound strange? But this is the fact. I had to do it—for the sake of my people and my religion I had to do it. When I recovered those papers I slew him as he knew I would. He was the only thing on earth that I had to care for."

"Oh! Had you not a daughter?"

The woman made a gesture of contempt.

"A poor creature," she said. "But I brought her up in the strong faith I follow, and so she has not been without her uses. Not that she knows anything of the Holy Temple and the ceremonial there. I never told her about the two men who escaped along the Black Valley. If I had, I should have known you to be a worthy

antagonist instead of a half-witted fool, and then you would never have brought me to this pass. Oh, if I had only told her that!"

There was a passionate ring in the woman's voice. It was the first time during the interview that she had displayed any humanity.

"You didn't, and there is an end of it," Ralph said. "Go on."

"Is there any need to go on? I have failed, and there is an end of the matter. When my husband died, my feelings were turned to rage and hatred of you all."

"Why should you all live and prosper while he was dead?" said Mrs. May. "With your money I could do anything among my own people. I could found a new dynasty. Did I not possess the occult knowledge of the East with a thorough knowledge of what you are pleased to call Western civilization? I could do it. A little longer and your wealth would have come to my child; in other words, it would have come to me. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Perfectly. I have understood for some time. Before I returned to England I had an idea of what was at the bottom of the vendetta. But you would not have succeeded. Tchigorsky and myself made up our minds that if we could not bring the crimes home to you we would shoot you."

Ralph spoke with a grim coldness that was not without its effect upon the listener. Hard as she was, the sentiment was after her own heart.

"That would have been murder," she said.

"Perhaps so. In the cold prosaic eyes of the law we might have been regarded as criminals of the type you mention; but we did not propose to pay any deference to the law. Nor would our deed have been discovered. You would simply have disappeared, we should have shot you and thrown your body into the sea. And I don't fancy that the deed would have weighed very heavily on the conscience of either of us."

The woman smiled. Nothing seemed to disturb her. She was full of passionate fury against the decrees of fate; but she did not show it.

"I suppose you planned everything out?" she asked.

"Everything, Tchigorsky and myself between us. It was Tchigorsky who rescued my nephew after your familiar in the blue dress and red hat had cut the mast and sculls. We guessed that the search for Geoffrey would empty the house, and that you would take advantage of the fact.

"Geoffrey and I watched you laying those wires. It was I who saw that you had a taste of the poison. I wanted to lay you by the heels here while Tchigorsky overhauled your possessions. Your messenger was waylaid and robbed of your key. Also I opened the letter you sent by my niece so that your confederates might be summoned to your assistance."

"Marion has come back again?"

"Within the last hour, yes. You will see her presently."

The woman smiled curiously.

"Not to-night," she said. "Not tonight. I am tired, and fancy I shall sleep well. I shall be glad of a long, long rest. Shall I see your father?"

"No," Ralph said sternly. "You certainly shall not."

"Then good-night. Do not be surprised if I beat you yet."

* * * * *

It was late and the family were retiring. Marion had already gone. In the drawing-room a group had gathered round the fire. They were silent and sad, for they had heard many things that had moved them strangely. There was a knock at the door, and Symonds looked in.

"My prisoner is dead," she said coldly and unmoved. "I suppose she managed to secrete some poison and take it. But she is dead."

"It is well," Ravenspur replied. "It might have been worse. It was the best she could do to lift the shadow of disgrace from this unhappy house."

L'ENVOI.

MARION had bowed her head before the coming storm. She asked no mercy and expected none. Yet she looked the same pure, unaffected saint she had ever appeared. Ravenspur would have taken her hand, but she drew it away.

"It is true," she said. "I am a fallen angel. I have never been anything else. Put it down to my mother's training if you like; but I came here as her friend, not yours. My religion is hers, my feelings are hers; I am of her people. With all the wicked knowledge of the East I came here to cut you off root and branch."

"Why?" Ravenspur said brokenly, "in the name of Heaven, why?"

"Because for years I have been taught to hate you; because I am at heart an Asiatic. It seemed grand to have all your money, so that I might be a great person in my own country some day. Then I came and brought the curse with me. It never seemed to strike any of you that the curse and I came together. Three deaths followed. In every one of these I played a part; I was responsible for them all. Shall I tell you how?"

"No, no," said Ravenspur. "Heavens! this is too horrible. To think of you looking so sweet and so fair and good; to think that you should have crept in to our hearts only to betray us like this. We want to hear nothing beyond your confession. Have you a heart at all, or are you a beautiful fiend?"

"I did not imagine that I had a heart at all until I came here," Marion replied. She had not abated a jot of her sweetness of expression or angelic manner. "Then gradually I began to love you all. When I met my cousin Geoffrey I recognised the fact that I was a woman.

"More than once I have been on the point of betraying myself to him. But the more passion for him filled my heart the worse I felt. I was going to kill you all off and keep Geoffrey for myself. If Vera had died he would have come to care for me in time. I know he would.

"Then my mother came. I was not getting along fast enough for her. Her keen eyes saw into my breast and discovered my secret at once. For that reason she marked Geoffrey down for her next victim. I tried to warn him; wrote him a letter. And I had to do him to death myself. It was I who cut the mast away; it was I who sawed the sculls. I was the girl in the blue dress."

"Amazing," Geoffrey murmured. "To think of it! Marion! Marion!"

There were tears in his eyes; he could not be angry with her. There were tears in the eyes of everybody. Vera was crying softly. And all the grief was so many daggers in the heart of the unhappy girl.

"Go on," she said. "Cry for me. Every look of pity and every sign of grief stings me to the quick. Perhaps I am mad; perhaps I am not responsible for my actions. But I swear that all the time I have been plotting against your lives I have cared for you. Only my training and my religion forced me on. Call me insane if you please, as you say of the fakir who sleeps upon a bed of sharp nails. I could explain all the mysteries—"

"You need not," Ralph said. "I can do that in good time. From the first I knew you, from the first I have dogged you from room to room at night and frustrated your designs. Then came Tchigorsky, who finished the task for me. Need I say more?"

Marion moved towards the door. The imploring look had gone from her face; her eyes had grown sad and hopeless. And yet in the face of her confession, in face of the knowledge of her crimes, not one of them had the slightest anger for her.

"I am going," she said. "In the event of this happening, I had made my plans. It may be that I shall have to take my trial; it may be that I shall be spared. One thing you may be certain of—my mother will never stand in the dock."

Ralph rose and slipped quietly from the room.

"If she dies, if anything happens to her," Marion went on, "it may be possible to spare me. Nobody knows anything to my dishonor outside the family but Dr. Tchigorsky, and you can rely upon his silence. If my mother is no more, there need be no scandal. Farewell, farewell to you all! Oh! if Heaven had been good to me, and sent me here as a little child, then what a happy life might have been mine!"

She passed out of the room, and nobody made any attempt to detain her.

It was a long, long time before anybody spoke, and no voice was raised above a whisper. The shock was stupendous. In none of their past sorrows and troubles had their feelings been more outraged.

The cloud lay heavy upon them all; it would be a long while before it passed away. Ravenspur rose at length, his face white and worn.

"We can do no good here," he said. "Perhaps sleep will bring us merciful relief."

It was at this moment, that Symonds looked in with her information. It was no shock, because all were past being shocked. Vera cried on Geoffrey's shoulder.

"I am glad of it," she whispered; "It's an awful thing to say, but I am glad. It saves Marion. We shall never see her again; but I am glad she is saved."

* * * * *

A young couple were looking down on the Mediterranean from the terrace of an old garden filled with the choicest flowers. The man looked bronzed and well, the girl radiantly happy. For grief has no abiding place in the eyes of youth.

"Doesn't it seem wonderful Geoffrey?" the girl said. "Positively I cannot realise that we have been married three weeks. I shall wake up presently and find myself back at Ravenspur again wondering what dreadful thing is going to happen next."

Geoffrey touched a letter that lay in Vera's lap.

"Here is the evidence of our freedom," he said. "Read it to me, please."

Vera picked up the letter. There was no heading. Then she read:

"I am near you and yet far off. I hear little things from the world from time to time, and I know that you are married to Geoffrey. I felt that I must write you a few lines.

"I am in a convent here, in a convent from whence I can never emerge again. Heaven knows how many human tragedies are bound up in these grey old walls. But of all the miserable wretches here, there is none more miserable than myself. Still, in my new faith I have found consolation. I know that there is hope even for sinners as black as myself.

"Will it sound strange to you to hear that I long and yearn for you always—that I still love those whom I would have destroyed? I meant to write you a long letter, but my heart is too full. Do not reply, because we are not allowed to have letters here.

"Heaven bless you both and give you the happiness you deserve!

"MARION."

Geoffrey took up the letter and tore it into minute fragments. The gentle breeze carried it over the oleanders and lemon-trees like snow.

Down below the blue sea sparkled, and the world seemed full of the pure delight of life.

"Geoffrey," Vera said, after a pause, "are we too happy?"

"Is it possible to be too happy?" Geoffrey replied.

"Well, too selfishly happy I mean. It seems awful to be so blissful when Marion is full of misery. I shall never feel anything but affection for her. It seems a strange thing to say, but I mean it. Poor Marion."

Geoffrey stooped and kissed the quivering lips.

"Poor Marion, indeed!" he said. "Marion was two distinct persons. Of all the shocks we ever had, her confession hurt me most of all. A creature so sweet and pure and good—a veritable angel! It is sufficient to utterly destroy one's faith in human nature. It would if I hadn't got you."