



The midnight guest

Fred Merrick White

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She twisted her handkerchief in the hound's collar.

THE MIDNIGHT GUEST

A Detective Story

BY

FRED M. WHITE

**AUTHOR OF "THE CRIMSON BLIND," "THE CORNER HOUSE,"
ETC.**

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A STRANGE HOME-COMING.
MOTHER AND CHILD.
IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.
AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND.
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THE HOUND AGAIN.
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A RAY OF LIGHT.
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THE MIDNIGHT GUEST.

[CHAPTER I.](#)

AT WHOSE HAND?

A hansom pulled up in front of 799, Park Lane, and a slim figure of a woman, dressed in deep mourning, ran up the broad flight of marble

steps leading to the house. Her features were closely concealed by a thick veil, so that the footman who answered the ring could make nothing of the visitor. Her voice was absolutely steady as she asked to see Lord Ravenspur at once.

"That is impossible, madam," the footman protested; "his lordship is not yet down, and besides----"

"There is no 'besides' about it," the visitor said, imperiously; "it is a matter of life and death."

Once more the servant hesitated. There was something about this woman that commanded his respect. The hour was still early for Park Lane, seeing that it was barely nine o'clock, and the notable thoroughfare was practically deserted. From the distance came the hoarse cries of a number of newsboys who were racing across the Park. One of them came stumbling down Park Lane, filling the fresh spring atmosphere with his shouts. Evidently something out of the common had happened to bring these birds of ill omen westward at so early an hour. With the curiosity of his class the footman turned to listen.

"Terrible murder in Fitzjohn Square! Death of Mr. Louis Delahay, the famous artist! Artist found dead in his studio! Full details!"

The well-trained servant forgot his manners for the moment.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "it can't be true. Why, Mr. Delahay was a great friend of my master up to the last day or two----"

"I am Mrs. Delahay," the veiled woman said with quiet intentness. "Please don't stand staring at me like that, but take me to your master at once. It is imperative that I should see Lord Ravenspur without a moment's delay."

The footman collected his scattered wits, and stammered out some kind of apology. There were other newsboys racing down the Lane

now. It seemed as if London was ringing with the name of Louis Delahay. Then the great double doors of the big house closed sullenly and shut out the horrid sound. At any other time the veiled woman might have been free to admire the luxury and extravagant good taste of her surroundings. There were many people who regarded Lord Ravenspur as the most fortunate and talented man in London. Not only had he been born to the possession of a fine old title, but he had almost unlimited wealth as well. As if this were not sufficient, Nature had endowed him with a handsome presence and an intellect far beyond the common. Apparently there was nothing that Ravenspur could not do. He was a fine sportsman, and a large number of his forty odd years had been spent big game shooting abroad. What time he passed in England was devoted almost exclusively to artistic pursuits. As a portrait painter Ravenspur stood on a level with the great masters of his time. More than one striking example of sculpture had come from his chisel. He had as much honour in the Salons of Vienna and Paris as he had within the walls of Burlington House. In fine, Ravenspur was a great personage, a popular figure in society, and well known everywhere. His lavish hospitality was always in the best of good taste, and the *entrée* to 799, Park Lane was accounted a rare privilege by all his friends.

But the woman in black was thinking nothing of this, as she followed the footman along marble corridors to a sunny morning-room at the back of the house. The footman indicated a chair, but the visitor waved him aside with a gesture of impatience.

"Go and fetch your master at once," she said.

For a few moments she paced up and down, weaving her way in and out amongst the rare objects of art like a wild animal that is freshly caged. She threw back her long, black veil presently as if the atmosphere of the place stifled her. Her face might have been that of a marble statue, so intensely white and rigid it was. It was only the rapid dilation of the dark eyes which showed that the stranger had life and feeling at all. She turned abruptly as Lord Ravenspur

came into the room. His handsome, smiling face and prematurely iron-grey hair afforded a strong contrast to the features of his visitor. He came forward with extended hands.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Maria," he said. "But what is wrong? Louis is all right, I suppose?"

"Louis is dead!" the woman said in the same cold, strained voice. "He has been foully murdered. I could not say more if I spoke for an hour. Louis is dead!"

The speaker repeated the last three words over and over again as if she were trying to realise the dread significance of her own message. Ravenspur stood there with his hand to his head, shocked and grieved almost beyond the power of speech.

"This is terrible," he murmured at length. "My dear Maria, I cannot find words to express my sympathy. Could you tell me how it happened? But perhaps I am asking too much."

"No," Mrs. Delahay replied, still speaking with the utmost calmness; "I am ready to answer any question you like to put to me. I am absolutely dazed and stunned. As yet I can realise nothing. But, perhaps, before the reaction comes I had better tell you everything. To think that I should lose him in this way whilst I am still a bride! But I dare not pity myself as yet, there is far too much stern work to be done. There will be plenty of time later on for the luxury of grief."

"Won't you sit down?" Ravenspur murmured.

"My dear friend, I couldn't. I must be walking about. I feel as if I could walk about for years. But I will try and tell you how it happened. He came back to London yesterday afternoon, as you know, and put up at the Grand Hotel. You see, I had never been in London before, and so I know nothing at all about it. If we had only gone straight to our own house in Fitzjohn Square this dreadful thing--but why do I think of that? You know the house was not quite

ready for us, and that was the reason why we went to the Grand. After visiting a theatre last night Louis announced his intention of going as far as our house. I understood him to say that he required something from his studio. There were no caretakers on the premises, but Louis had a latchkey, so that was all right. I went to bed about twelve o'clock, thinking no evil, and not in the least alarmed because Louis had not come back. As you know, he had always been a terribly late man, and I thought perhaps he had met one of his old companions, or perhaps he had turned into the Garrick Club. Still, when I woke up this morning about six, and found that he had not returned, I became genuinely alarmed. I took a cab as far as Fitzjohn Square, and went into the house."

"One moment," Ravenspur interrupted. "I don't quite understand how you managed to get into the premises."

"That was an easy matter, though the front door was closed. The latchkey was still in the lock. I only had to turn it to obtain admission. I went straight to the studio, and there on the floor---- but I really cannot say any more. Strung up as I am I could not describe it to you. . . . I suppose I cried out, and when I came back to a proper comprehension of things the place was full of police. For the last two hours I have been with them answering all sorts of questions. Then something told me to come to you, and here I am. And whatever you do, please don't leave me alone. I could not bear to be alone."

"I wish I could tell you how sorry I am," Lord Ravenspur murmured. "This is a most extraordinary business altogether. You say that Louis left you not later than twelve o'clock to go as far as Fitzjohn Square, and that, when he left the Grand Hotel, he had no other object in his mind. You are quite sure of this?"

"I am absolutely certain," Mrs. Delahay replied.

"Well, that is a strange thing," Ravenspur went on. "It so happens that I had an accident to my own studio a day or two ago, and until yesterday the workmen were in repairing the glass roof. I was engaged upon a small work which I was anxious to finish, and it occurred to me that I might just as well make use of your husband's studio, seeing that he was away from home and did not require it. I obtained a duplicate key from the house agent, and all yesterday I was working on my picture there. In fact it is in Louis' studio at the present moment. After some friends who were dining with me last night left, I walked as far as Fitzjohn Square, and till nearly a quarter past one this morning I was at work there. I might have gone on all night, only the electric light failed suddenly, and I was left in darkness. Then I came home and went to bed. And I am prepared to swear that it had turned half-past one before I left your house, and there was no sign of Louis up to that time."

"It is inexplicable," the woman said wearily. "When I try to think my brain seems to turn to water, and everything goes misty before my eyes. I feel like a woman who has had no sleep for years. I feel as if I must get something to relieve this terrible pressure on my brain. Is there nothing that you can suggest?"

"I think so," Ravenspur said quietly. "I am going to take you back to your hotel, and call for a doctor on the way. You cannot go on like this. No human mind could stand it."

CHAPTER II.

NO. 1 FITZJOHN SQUARE

A few moments later and Ravenspur's brougham was being rapidly driven in the direction of the Grand Hotel. No words were spoken on the journey, but Ravenspur did not fail to notice how his companion shook and quivered as the shouts of the newsboys reached her ears. It seemed as if all London had given itself over to this last sensational tragedy. It was as if thousands of strange rough hands were pressing upon the still bleeding wound. To an intensely sympathetic nature like Ravenspur's, the relief of the destination was great. At his suggestion of food his companion shuddered. The mere idea of it turned her physically sick. Utterly worn out and exhausted she dropped into a chair. There was a light now of something like madness in her eyes. The doctor bustled in presently with something in his hand. Mrs. Delahay drank the medicine in a mechanical way, scarcely knowing what she was doing. Then, gradually, her rigid limbs relaxed, and the staring dark eyes were closed.

"She'll do now for some time," the doctor whispered. "I have telephoned for a nurse who may be here now at any moment. Don't let me detain you. I have got my motor outside, and in any case I must remain till the nurse arrives."

"That is very good of you," Ravenspur murmured. "As far as I am concerned I should like to make some inquiries. I have known Delahay now for the last five years; indeed, it was I who persuaded him to take up his quarters in London. It seems a terrible thing that so promising a career should be cut short like this. That man would have come to the top of his profession, and, so far as I know, he hadn't a single enemy in the world. Perhaps, by this time, the Scotland Yard people may have found a clue."

Ravenspur drove straight away to Fitzjohn Square, and made his way through the crowd of morbid folks who had gathered outside. As he expected, he found the house in the hands of the police. Inspector Dallas came forward and greeted him respectfully.

"This is a terrible affair, my lord," he said.

"Ghastly," Ravenspur exclaimed. "It was a great shock when Mrs. Delahay came round to me this morning. And the strange part of the whole business is that I was in this very house myself, quite alone, till half-past one. Perhaps I had better explain the circumstances to you, as the knowledge might prove useful. . . . And now you know all about it. Mind you, I saw nothing; I did not hear a sound. Indeed, I am quite convinced that there was no one on the premises when I left."

"But you had no means of making sure," the inspector protested. "The miscreants might have been here all the time. They might have been hiding in a room upstairs waiting for you to go."

"They might have attacked me as far as that goes," Ravenspur replied. "My word, the mere suggestion of it turns one cold."

"At any rate, they were not after your lordship," the inspector said, thoughtfully. "Of course, I am assuming for the sake of argument that the murderer, or murderers, were actually here when you arrived last night. If so, the whole thing was carefully premeditated. These people had no quarrel with you, and, therefore, they did not molest you. All the same, they wanted to get rid of you, or they would not have cut off the light."

"But did they cut off the light?" Ravenspur asked.

"That we can prove in a moment. I am going on the theory that these people wanted to get you out of the way, so they short-circuited the current and left you in darkness. That was a very useful expedient, and had the desired effect. I am very glad you told me this because it may be the means of putting us on the track of important evidence. But let us go down to the basement, and examine the electric meter."

Ravenspur followed his companion down the dark steps leading to the basement, and Inspector Dallas struck a light. Then, with a grim smile, he pointed to a cable which led from the meter to the

different rooms on the upper floors. The cable had been clean cut with some sharp instrument, a fracture which must have been recently made, for the main wire to the cable gleamed like gold.

"So far, so good," Dallas said. "We have proved by yonder demonstration that these people were here last night whilst you were actually at work in the studio."

"That puzzles me more than ever," Ravenspur replied. "Why did they not get rid of me an hour before, which they could have done equally as well, by the same simple expedient?"

"Simply because they could afford to wait till half-past one. You may depend upon it that Mr. Delahay's movements were absolutely known to them. They were perfectly well aware of the fact that he was not expected here till some time past half-past one. It is not a nice insinuation to make, but when Mr. Delahay left his hotel at midnight, he had not the slightest intention of coming straight here. Doubtless he had important business which was likely to last him an hour and a half, and for some reason or other he did not want his wife to know what it was. Speaking as one man of the world to another, Mr. Delahay's excuse for getting out strikes me as being rather a shallow one. Surely a married man, more or less on his honeymoon, does not want to visit an empty house after midnight. Surely he could have waited till daylight."

"Then you think he went out to keep an appointment?"

"I feel quite convinced of it, your lordship. And, moreover, the appointment was a secret one of which Mrs. Delahay was to know nothing. I will go still further, and say that Mr. Delahay came here after you had gone this morning to keep an appointment. It is just possible that he might have been in the house during your presence here. It is just possible that he cut the cable himself."

"Ah, but that won't quite do," Ravenspur protested. "When I came out of the house this morning I saw that the front door was carefully

fastened, and I am prepared to swear that the latchkey which Mrs. Delahay found this morning was not in the lock then. No, no; I am quite sure that poor Delahay must have come here after I left. I am not prepared to contest your theory that my unfortunate friend came here to keep an appointment. Indeed, the presence of the latchkey in the door proves that he was in a hurry, and perhaps a little upset, or he would not have committed the mistake of leaving the key behind him. But after all, said and done, this is merely conjecture on our part. Have you found anything yourself that is likely to give you a clue?"

Inspector Dallas hesitated just for a moment.

"Perhaps I ought not to mention it," he said, "but I am sure I can rely upon your lordship's discretion. When I was called this morning I found Mr. Delahay lying on the floor of the studio quite dead. So far as we could see there were no marks of violence on the body except a small puncture over the heart, which appears to have been made with some very fine instrument. But, of course, we can't speak definitely on that point till we have had the inquest. As far as we can judge, something like a struggle must have taken place, because the loose carpets on the floor were in great disorder, and one or two articles of furniture had been overturned. You may say that this proves nothing, except that violence was used. But in the hand of the dead man we found something that might be useful to us. Perhaps you would like to see it."

Lord Ravenspur intimated that he should. From a pocket-book Dallas produced a photograph, *carte de visite* size, which had been torn into half a dozen pieces. The photograph was considerably faded, and in the tearing the actual face itself had been ripped out of all recognition. Still, judging from the small fragments, it was possible to make out that the picture had been that of a woman. One scrap of card bore the words "and Co., Melbourne." The rest of the lettering had apparently vanished.

"This must have been taken a long time ago," Ravenspur said. "It is so terribly faded."

"Not necessarily, my lord," Dallas said. "We know very little about that photograph as yet except that it was taken in Australia. Of course, it is fair to assume that the picture is an old one judging from the colouring, but your lordship must not forget that foreign photographs are always much fainter than those taken in this country, because the light is so much stronger and more brilliant. At any rate, the fact remains that we found those fragments tightly clenched in Mr. Delahay's left hand, all of which points to some intrigue, with a woman at the bottom of it. Of course, I know nothing whatever about Mr. Delahay's moral character----"

"Then I'll tell you," Ravenspur said sharply. "My late friend was the soul of honour. He was a very quick, passionate man, and he inherited his temper from his Italian mother. But the man was incapable of anything mean or dishonourable. He was genuinely in love with his wife, and cared nothing for any other woman. How that photograph came into his possession I don't know. Probably we never shall know. But you can at once dismiss from your mind the suspicion that Delahay was mixed up in that vulgar kind of business. Now, is there anything more you can tell me?"

"Well, no," Dallas said, after a short pause. "There is nothing that strikes me, no suggestions that seem to need a doctor's opinion. We shall find that the cause of death is the small puncture over the heart that I spoke of. To hazard an opinion, it might be caused by one of those glass stilettos--the Corsican type of weapon where the blade is snapped off in the wound. It leaves the smallest mark, and no blood follows--a difficult thing to trace without great care. Of course, the *post mortem*----"

CHAPTER III.

THE MARK OF THE BEAST.

A sudden quick cry broke from Ravenspur's lips. He fairly staggered back, his white face was given over to a look of peculiar horror. Then, as he became aware of the curious glances of his companion he made a great effort to regain his self-control.

"I--I don't understand," he stammered. "A stiletto made of glass! A long, slender blade like an exaggerated needle, I presume. Yet, now I come to think of it, I recollect that, when I was painting a 'Borgia' subject once, my costume dealer spoke of one of those Corsican daggers. I did not take much interest in the conversation at the time. And so you have an idea that this is the way in which my poor friend met his death?"

Ravenspur was speaking quietly and easily now. He had altogether regained control of himself save for an occasional twitching of his lips. He paced up and down the room thoughtfully for some time, utterly unconscious of Dallas' sharp scrutiny.

"I suppose there is nothing more you have to tell me?" he said at length. "This is evidently going to be one of those crimes which thrill a whole community for a week, and then are never heard of again. Still, if there is anything I can do for you, pray do not hesitate to ask for my assistance. I suppose we can do no more till after the inquest is over?"

Without waiting for any reply from his companion Ravenspur quitted the room, and went back to his brougham. He threw himself into a

corner, and pulled his hat over his eyes. For a long time he sat there immersed in deep and painful thought, and utterly unconscious of his surroundings. Even when the brougham pulled up in Park Lane he made no attempt to dismount till the footman opened the door and addressed him by name.

"I--I beg your pardon, Walters," he said, "this terrible business prevents my thinking about anything else. I am going into my own room now, and I am not to be disturbed by anybody. If I am dining out tonight, tell Mr. Ford to write and cancel the engagement. Oh, here is Ford himself."

The neat, clean-shaven secretary came forward.

"Your lordship seems to have forgotten," he said. "You are giving a dinner here tonight yourself. You gave orders especially to arrange it, because you were anxious for some of the Royal Academicians to meet the young Polish artist----"

"I had clean forgotten it," Ravenspur said, with something like a groan. "Entertaining people tonight will be like dancing in fetters. Still, I must make the best of it, for I should not like that talented young foreigner to be disappointed. In the meantime, I am not at home to anybody."

With this admonition Ravenspur passed up to his own private rooms, and carefully locked the door behind him. He took a cigar from his case, and lighted it, only to fling it away a moment later in disgust. He stood just for a moment with his hand on a decanter of brandy, and then with a smile for his own weakness poured out a glassful, which he drank without delay.

"I am a fool and a coward," he muttered. "What can there be to be afraid of after all these years? Why do I hesitate in this way when boldness and decision would avert the danger?"

Ravenspur sat there, looking moodily into space. He heard the house resounding to the sound of the luncheon gong, but he made no movement. The mere suggestion of food was repulsive to him, clean as his habits were and robust as his appetite usually was. The Lane and the Park were gay with traffic now; the roar of locomotion reached the ears of Ravenspur as he sat there. Presently the noise of the newsboys came again, and the name of Delahay seemed to fill the air to the exclusion of everything else. Ravenspur rang his bell, and asked for a paper.

The flimsy, ill-printed sheet fairly reeked with the latest and most ghastly of London tragedies. Nothing else seemed to matter for the moment. Seven or eight columns were given over to an account of the affair. Before he set himself down to read it steadily through, Ravenspur glanced at the last paragraph, to find that the preliminary inquiry had been adjourned for a week. Most of the florid sensational paragraphs contained nothing new. The only point that interested the reader was the medical evidence.

This was compact and to the point. Death had been undoubtedly due to a stab over the heart which had been inflicted by some long, pointed instrument, not much thicker, apparently, than a needle. So far as the police doctor could say, the weapon used had been an Italian stiletto. There was practically no blood. Indeed, the whole thing had been accomplished in a cool and deliberate manner by a man who was not only master of his art, but who must have possessed a considerable knowledge of anatomy. Evidently he had chosen a spot to inflict the wound with careful deliberation, for the deviation of half an inch either way might have produced comparatively harmless results. It was the opinion of the doctor that, had the fatal thrust been made through the bare skin, all traces of it might have been overlooked. It was only the adherence of the dead man's singlet to the tiny puncture that had caused sufficient inflammation to attach suspicion to the point of impact. All this pointed to the fact that the crime had been clearly premeditated and carried out coldly and deliberately.

For the moment, however, the great puzzle was to discover how the murderer had been aware that he would be in a position to find his victim at Fitzjohn Square. It was proved conclusively enough that Louis Delahay had come back to England on the spur of the moment, and that equally on the spur of the moment he had made up his mind to visit his house, and, therefore, nobody could possibly have known besides his wife when he had left the Grand Hotel. On this point public curiosity would have to wait, seeing that Mrs. Delahay was in no condition to explain. In fact, she was in the hands of a medical man who had prescribed absolute quiet for the present.

Ravenspur tossed the paper impatiently aside, and rang for his tea. The slow day dragged along until it was time for him to dress and prepare for the reception of his guests. He came down presently to the drawing-room, where one or two of the men had already assembled. His old pleasant smile was on his face now. He was once more the polished, courtly man of the world. He steeled himself for what he knew was coming. Practically the whole of his guests were artists of distinction. And the death of Louis Delahay would be the one topic of conversation. The blinds were down now, for the young spring night had drawn in rapidly and it was perfectly dark outside. The clock struck the hour of eight, and the butler glanced in inquiringly. Ravenspur shook his head.

"Not quite yet, Simmonds," he said; "we are waiting for Sir James Seton. As he is usually the soul of punctuality he is not likely to detain us."

"You can take his place if necessary," one of the guests laughed. "When I see Seton and our host together I always feel quite bewildered. Two such public men had no business to be so absurdly alike."

"There is no real 'resemblance,'" Ravenspur laughed, "though people are constantly making absurd mistakes. It is excusable to mistake one for the other in the dark, but not in the daylight. Besides, Seton

is a much taller man than I am, and much slimmer. We should hear nothing about this likeness, but for certain gentlemen of the Press who make their living out of little paragraphs."

"Well, they have got plenty to occupy their attention now," another guest remarked. "This business of poor Delahay's is likely to give them occupation for some time. Tell us all about it, Ravenspur. I hear that you were down at Fitzjohn Square this morning. Is there anything fresh?"

Ravenspur groaned in his spirit. All the same, his manner was polished and easy as he turned to the speaker. But before he had time to give any details there was a sound of excited voices in the hall outside, the banging of a door or two, and then a tall, elderly man staggered into the room, and fell into a seat. There was an ugly scar on the side of his face, a few drops of blood stained his immaculate shirt-front.

"Good Heavens!" Ravenspur cried. "My dear Seton, what is the matter? Simmonds, bring the brandy here at once."

"No, no," the newcomer gasped; "I shall be all right in a minute or two. A most extraordinary thing happened to me just now. I was coming towards the Lane by the back of Lord Fairhaven's house on my way here when a man came out from under the shadow of the trees, and commenced a violent attack upon me. Fortunately, I was able to ward him off with my stick, but not before he had marked me in the way you see. Somebody happened to be coming along, and my assailant vanished. Still, it was a nasty adventure, and all the more extraordinary because the fellow evidently mistook me for our friend Ravenspur. He actually called me by that name."

All eyes were turned in the host's direction, for a strange, choking cry burst from his lips.

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S FACE.

It was such an unusual thing for Lord Ravenspur to show his feelings so plainly. For the most part he passed as one of the most self-contained men in London. He had always boasted, too, of perfect health. His nerves were in the best condition. And now he had started to his feet, his hand pressed to his heart, his face white, and wet with terror. More than one of the guests came forward, but Ravenspur waved them aside.

"I am behaving like a child," he said. "I suppose the time comes when all of us begin to feel the effect of approaching age. I don't know why Seton's misfortunes should have upset me so much. But, perhaps, coming on the horrors of this morning, it has been a little too much for me. It is a most scandalous thing that a gentleman can't go out to dinner without being molested in this fashion. What are the police thinking about?"

Ravenspur spoke in hot indignation; in fact, he was slightly overdoing it. He fussed about Seton, and insisted that the latter should go up to his room, which suggestion the guest waived aside. He was the far more collected of the two.

"Oh, nonsense," he said; "a canful of hot water will repair all the damage. Don't you worry about me. You go in to dinner, and leave me to young Walter here."

A door opened at that moment, and a young man entered, and came eagerly across the room in the direction of the speaker. Walter

Lance might have been Lord Ravenspur as he had been twenty years ago. As a matter of fact, they were uncle and nephew, Lance being the son of Ravenspur's favorite sister, who had died some years before. For the rest, he was a barrister eagerly waiting his chance of success, and, in the meantime, occupied himself in the capacity of Ravenspur's private secretary. He seemed to have heard all that had taken place. He was warm in his sympathy as he piloted Sir James Seton to his own room. They were going down again almost before the dinner gong had ceased to sound, and by this time a knot of dinner guests were discussing ordinary topics again.

To the casual observer there was no sign of trouble or tragedy here. Everything was perfect in its way. The oval table glittered with silver and old Bohemian glass. The banks of flowers might have been arranged by the master hand of an artist. Ravenspur sat there gaily enough now, his conversation gleaming with wit and humour, the most perfect host in London. There was no sign whatever of his earlier agitation. And yet, strive as he would, from time to time the name of Louis Delahay crept into the conversation. It was in vain that Lord Ravenspur attempted to turn the stream of thought into other channels. He was glad enough at length when the dinner came to an end, and the party of guests broke up into little groups. The host approached Seton presently with a request to know whether he would care to play bridge or not.

"No bridge," Sir James said emphatically. "I am tired of the tyranny of it. I wonder that you should make such a suggestion, Ravenspur, seeing how you detest the commonplace. But, at any rate, I will have another of those excellent cigarettes of yours."

"It shall be just as you please, my friends," Ravenspur said wearily. "Now let us go and have a coffee in the studio. It is much cooler there, and there is more space to breathe."

The suggestion was received with general approval, and a move was immediately made in the direction of the studio. The apartment lay

at the end of a long corridor, which cut it off from the rest of the house, the studio being in reality a huge garden room, which Ravenspur had built for reasons of privacy. He took a latchkey from his pocket and opened the door.

"I always keep this place locked," he explained. "Some years ago my three Academy pictures were stolen just as they were finished, and since then I have taken no risk. The annoying part of the whole thing was that one of the missing pictures was the best thing I ever did. What became of it is a mystery."

"I remember the picture perfectly well," one of the guests remarked. "It was the study of a woman. Do you recollect my coming in one night and you asked me my opinion of it?"

"I think I can remember it," Ravenspur said.

"Well, it was a superb piece of work," the first speaker went on; "anything more fascinating than the woman's face I don't recollect seeing. I don't know who your model was, Ravenspur, but you had a rare find in her."

"I had no model," Ravenspur explained. "The face was more or less an ideal one--composite, if you like, but resembling nobody in particular. However, the thing was a great loss to me, and I have never ceased to regret it. That is why I always keep this place locked up; even when the room is cleaned out, I am always present to see that nothing is disturbed. It is a whim of mine."

As he spoke Ravenspur switched on the electric lights, until the whole of the beautiful apartment glowed to the illumination of the shaded lamps. The studio itself was circular in shape, and finished in a great dome of stained glass. The floor was littered with rare old Persian carpets, and lounges from all parts of the world were dotted about here and there. Round the walls was an almost unique collection of armour. From the centre of the floor rose a fine acacia tree, the vivid green foliage of which seemed to suffer nothing from

being cut off from the outer light and air. Altogether the place was quite unique in its way, and striking evidence of Ravenspur's originality and good taste. On little tables here and there were hundreds of photographs, most of them signed, testifying to the great popularity which Ravenspur enjoyed amongst all classes of society.

"You will have to leave these to the Nation," a guest laughed. "What a cosmopolitan gallery it is--a prince on the one side, and a prominent socialist on the other! Yet, after all, photographs are very commonplace things. You might look over a thousand before your fancy is taken by a face like this."

As he spoke the guest took up a portrait from one of the tables, and held it out at arm's length, so that the light fell upon the features. Unlike the rest, the photograph was not framed, and, judging from the edges, it had had a certain amount of rough usage in its time. As to the picture itself, it presented the features of a young and beautiful girl, with a great cloud of hair hanging over her shoulders. There was something almost tragic in the dark eyes; they seemed to tell a story all their own.

"A beautiful face," the guest went on. "The sort of face that a poet would weave an epic around. I don't want to be impertinent, Ravenspur, but I should like to know who she is."

"Where did you get that from?" Ravenspur asked. His voice sounded hard and cold, so that the man with the photograph in his hand turned in some surprise. "Where did you find it?"

"My dear fellow, I took it up off this table, as you might have done. Of course, it is no business of mine, and I am sorry if any careless words I have spoken----"

"The apology is mine," Ravenspur put in quickly. "I was annoyed, just for the moment, to think that that portrait should have been left about. I could have sworn that I had locked it carefully away in a

safe. You are perfectly right, my dear Seymour, there is a tragedy behind that charming face. But you will quite understand that I cannot discuss the matter with anybody."

"Oh, quite," the offending guest said hastily. "Still, it is a most lovely face. Now who does it remind me of?"

"The likeness is plain enough," Seton put in. "Why, it is the very image of our host's young ward, Miss Vera Rayne. Is there any relationship between them, Ravenspur?"

"Why, so it is!" Walter Lance cried. "Who can she be, uncle?"

Ravenspur had crossed the studio in the direction of a safe let into the wall. He placed his hand in one of the little pigeon holes there, as if seeking for something. Apparently he was unsuccessful in his search, for he shook his head doubtfully.

"Not there," Ravenspur said to himself. "Most extraordinary lapse of memory on my part. Of course, I must have taken that photograph from the safe when I was looking for something else, and----"

The speaker broke off abruptly. He slammed the door of the safe behind him, and returned to his guests. But the light had gone out of his eyes; he seemed to have suddenly aged.

"Let us have some coffee," he said. "Is it true, Marrion, that there is likely to be a serious split in the cabinet?"

CHAPTER V.

VERA RAYNE.

The conversation became more general now, so that it was possible a moment later for Ravenspur to slip out of the studio without his absence being observed. He went swiftly away to the library, where he hastily dashed off a note, which he handed over to a servant to be delivered immediately. He seemed to be somewhat easier in his mind now, for the smile had come back to his lips. The smile became deeper, and a shade more tender, as a young girl came into the room. She had evidently just returned from some social function, for she was in evening dress, with a light silken cloud thrown over her fair hair. Save for the brilliancy of her eyes, and the happy smile upon her lips, she bore a strong resemblance to the mysterious photograph, which had so disturbed Ravenspur a little time before. She crossed the room gaily, and kissed Ravenspur lightly on the cheek.

"So your friends have all gone?" she asked.

"No; they are still in the studio. But, tell me, have you had a very enjoyable evening? And how is it that you are back so soon?"

A faint splash of colour crept into the girl's cheeks. She seemed to be just a little embarrassed by the apparently simple question.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "One gets tired of going out every night. And it was rather dull. I daresay all this sounds very

ungrateful when you give me everything I could desire. But I am longing to get into the country again. It seems almost a crime for people to shut themselves up in dusty London, when the country is looking at its very best. Do you know, I was far happier when I was down in Hampshire."

"Well, we can't have everything our own way," Ravenspur smiled. "Still, we shall see what will happen later on. And now, I really must go back again to my guests."

Vera Rayne threw herself carelessly down into a chair. A little sigh escaped her lips. She ought to have been happy enough. She had all the blessings that good health and great wealth could procure. And yet there were crumpled rose leaves on her couch of down. The thoughtful look on her face deepened. She sat there so deeply immersed in her own reflections, that she was quite oblivious to the fact that she was no longer alone. Walter Lance had come into the room. He addressed the girl twice before he obtained any response. Then she looked up, and a wistful, tender smile lighted up her beautiful face.

"I was thinking," she said. "Do you know, Walter, I have been thinking a good deal lately. I suppose I am naturally more discontented than most girls, but I am getting very tired of this sort of life. Pleasure is so monotonous."

"Ungrateful," Walter laughed. He came and stood close to the speaker's side so that he could see down into the depths of her eyes, which were now turned fully upon his. "There are thousands of girls who envy your fortunate lot."

"I don't know why they should. You see, it is all very well for me to go on like this. It is all very well to be a fascinating mystery. The time has come when I ought to know things. For instance, I should like to know who I really am."

"What does it matter?" Lance asked. "What does it matter so long as I--so long as we all care for you. My dear girl, you pain me. And when you speak in that cold, not to say arbitrary way, as if--as if--really, Vera! It isn't that I want you to be more worldly than you are---"

"But then you see, I am not worldly, Walter. And I really should like to know who I am, and where I came from. It is all very well to tell people that I am the daughter of an old friend of Lord Ravenspur, and that he adopted me when my father died. That is sufficient for our friends and acquaintances, and seems to satisfy them, but it does not satisfy me. When I ask Lord Ravenspur about my parents he puts me off with one excuse or another, and if I insist he becomes quite stern and angry. He is so good to me that I don't like to bother him. And yet I can't go on like this."

Walter Lance looked somewhat uneasily at the speaker.

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

"My dear Walter, I mean exactly what I say," Vera said sadly. "I am tired of this constant round of pleasure. Really, it seems to me that the lives of the rich are quite as monotonous as those of the poor. We go our weary round of dinner and dance and reception, varied by an occasional theatre or concert. We see the same faces, and take part in the same vapid conversation---- Oh, Walter, how much nicer it would be to get one's own living!"

"How would you get yours?" Lance laughed.

"Well, at any rate, I could try. And that is what I am going to do, Walter. I have fully made up my mind not to stay here any longer. Don't think that I am ungrateful, or that I do not recognise Lord Ravenspur's great kindness to me. But you see I have no claim upon him, and if anything happened to him tomorrow what would my position be? I know he has a large income from his property, but that will go to his successor some day. Oh, I know you will think that

this is very hard and cold of me, but there are reasons, many and urgent reasons, why it is impossible----"

Vera broke off abruptly, and Walter could see that the tears had gathered in her eyes. There was something in those eyes, too, that caused his heart to beat a trifle faster, and brought him still closer to her side.

"Won't you tell me what it is?" he whispered. "We have always been such good friends, Vera. Forgive me asking you, but isn't this decision on your part rather a sudden one?"

"Oh, I am quite prepared to admit that," the girl said candidly, "and I wish I could explain. But you would not understand--was there ever a man yet who really understood a woman? The thing that you call impulse . . . I know that Lord Ravenspur had his own ideas as to my future, the same as he has in regard to yours."

"Oh, indeed," Walter said drily; "that is news to me. And in what way is my uncle interested in my welfare?"

"Do you mean to say he hasn't told you? He has mentioned it to me at least a score of times. You are going to marry Lady Clara Vavasour. That much is settled."

"Really, now, that is very kind of my uncle. But, unfortunately, I have views of my own on the subject. Lady Clara is a very nice girl, and I understand that she is rich, but she does not appeal to me in the least. My dear Vera, surely you are mistaken. Surely my uncle must have guessed, he could not be so blind as not to see--Vera, dearest, cannot you understand what I mean? Do you suppose that I could possibly have known you all this time without--without---- You know, I am certain that you know."

"Oh, no, no," Vera cried; "you must not speak like that. I cannot listen to you. I know that Lord Ravenspur has set his heart upon this

marriage, and it would be the basest ingratitude on my part if I---- but what am I talking about?"

The girl broke off in some confusion. The faint pink on her cheeks turned to a deeper crimson. Her eyes were cast down; she did not seem to realise that Walter had her hands in his, that he had drawn her close to his side.

"I must speak," he said huskily. "Even at the risk of your thinking me the most conceited man on earth, I must tell you what is uppermost in my mind now. My dear girl, I have known you ever since you were a little child. From the very first we have been the best of friends. I have watched you change from a girl to a woman. I have watched your mind expanding, and gradually I have come to know that you are the one girl in the world for me. I have not spoken like this before, because there seemed to be no need to do so. Everything was so natural, there did not appear to be any other end to a love like mine. But if I have been wrong, and if you tell me that you care nothing for me----"

"I couldn't," Vera whispered. "Oh, Walter, if you only knew----"

"Then you do care for me, my dearest. Yes, I can see it in your face, there is always the truth in your eyes. And now I can speak more freely. You were going away from here out of loyalty to my uncle, and because you deem it your duty to sacrifice your feelings rather than interfere with his plans. But, my dear girl, don't you see what a needless sacrifice it would be? Don't you see that any such action on your part would be worse than useless? But I will speak to you about this tomorrow. I am quite sure he is not the man to stand between us and our happiness. Would that I had thought of this before. I am sure that it would have saved you many an anxious moment."

Vera shook her head sadly. Walter's arms were about her now, her head rested on his shoulder. Just for the moment they were

absolutely oblivious to the world. They heard nothing of the sound of voices as Lord Ravenspur's guests drifted away; they were unconscious that he was standing in the doorway, now regarding them with stern disapproval. He hesitated just a moment, then he strode into the room. Walter had never seen his face so hard and cold before.

"I am sorry to intrude," he said, "but there is something I have to say to you, Walter. It is getting late now, Vera, and quite time that you were in bed."

The girl looked up with something like rebellion in her eyes.

"I am going into the drawing-room for half an hour," she said. "Perhaps Walter will come and say goodnight to me when you have finished your conversation. I think you understand what I mean. And don't be too hard on me. If you only knew how I have tried to do what--what----"

The tears rose to Vera's eyes, as she turned slowly and sadly away.

CHAPTER VI.

A VOICE IN THE DARK.

Vera turned away and walked quietly from the room, leaving the two men face to face. Lord Ravenspur was the first to speak.

"I am sorry for this," he said; "more sorry than I can tell you. Strange how one should be so wilfully blind. Strange how frequently even the cleverest man will overlook the inevitable. But I suppose I thought that you two had come to regard one another as brother and sister. Oh, I am not disputing your taste. There is not a more beautiful and fascinating girl in London than Vera. It is only natural that you should fall in love with her. But she knows the views I have for you. She knows to what an extent she is indebted to me. That being so it is her plain duty----"

"My dear uncle," Walter broke in eagerly, "if there is anybody to blame, it is I. Vera knows her duty plainly enough, and she would have acted upon it but for me. When I came in here tonight I was struck by the unhappiness of her face, and, naturally, I began to ask questions. It seems an egotistical thing to say, but Vera is as deeply attached to me as I am to her, and that was the source of her trouble. She had made up her mind to go away. She had made up her mind to get her own living. And why? Simply because she knew that you had other views for me, and that she stood in the way of your plans. It was only by a mere accident that the whole thing came out. But I have spoken the words now that are beyond recall, even if I wished to recall them, which I do not. There will never be another woman in the world for me."

"But the thing is impossible," Lord Ravenspur broke out harshly. "It is absolutely out of the question. I had other views for you, but I certainly should not have pressed them against your wishes. But all that is as nothing compared to this--this tragedy. I blame myself bitterly for my want of foresight. My conduct has been almost criminal. But, be that as it may, there must be no engagement between Vera and yourself. Don't press me to tell you why, because my lips are sealed, and I dare not speak. But, as you value your future, I implore you to carry this thing no further. I know this sounds an outrageous request, but I am speaking from the bottom of my heart. It is the fashion of the world to regard me as one of the most fortunate and enviable of men. I tell you, with all the force at

my command, that I would cheerfully change places with the humblest labourer on my estate. I have never dropped the mask before, and I probably never shall again. I am only doing it now so that you may be warned in time. Go back to Vera, and tell her what I say. Tell her that there are urgent reasons why a marriage between you is utterly out of the question. And if you will persist in having your own way, then let me ask you one final favour. Let the engagement be kept a secret. And now I have no more to say. Perhaps I have said too much as it is, only if you were aware what the last twenty-four hours has brought forth----"

Ravenspur broke off abruptly as if fearful of saying too much. His whole attitude had changed; his features quivered with an almost uncontrollable emotion. Then he turned on his heel, and strode down the corridor in the direction of the studio. Walter could hear the latch of the door click as it closed behind him. . . .

Ravenspur was alone with his own troubled thoughts. For a long time he paced up and down the room, then he took up the photograph which had excited so much attention amongst his guests earlier in the evening. He laid it down on a little table, and gazed at the face there long and sadly.

"Amazing!" Ravenspur muttered to himself. "Absolutely inexplicable! I could have sworn that I had the photograph still under lock and key. When did I take it from the safe, and why? Beyond all question, it was not on the table yesterday. Is this a mere coincidence, or is it a menace and warning of the old trouble which has never ceased to be with me night and day the last twenty years? And how the whole thing works together! First of all, poor Delahay is found murdered in his studio, and now something like the same thing happens to one of my guests who was unquestionably mistaken for me in the darkness. And as if that was not enough, those two young fools must take it into their heads to fancy that they are in love with one another. Heaven only knows how I shall make my way out of this terrible coil, even if I have the good luck to escape the

consequences of my folly! The most fortunate man in London! The most popular and most sought for! What a bitter travesty upon the truth it is! If they only knew! If there were only some power to lift the roof off of every house in London, what tragedies would be revealed! And how many friends would be left to me?"

Time was going on. A dozen clocks in different parts of the house struck twelve. As Ravenspur stood by the table, his moody eyes still bent upon the photographs, there was a sudden click and snap, and the whole place was plunged in darkness. The thing was so quick and unexpected that something like a cry of alarm broke from Ravenspur's lips. It all came to him in a flash that the tragedy of Fitzjohn Square was going to be repeated with himself in the *rôle* of the victim. This is just what had happened the previous evening, only there had been nothing to try his nerves then as they were being strained to breaking point now. Shaking and agitated in every limb he made his way across to where the switches were, but there was nothing wrong with them. He could hear no commotion in the house, such as would naturally follow the extinguishing of the light. Indeed, underneath the doorway he could see by the slit of light that the electrics in the corridor were still working.

The full horror of it was almost more than he could bear. A wild desire for light and companionship came upon him. His unsteady hand fumbled at the latch, which seemed in some way to have gone wrong, for the door refused to open. Ravenspur was breathing thickly and heavily. But he was sufficiently in possession of his faculties to realise that he was no longer alone in the room. He could distinctly hear someone breathing close to him. Then he caught the sound of a low chuckle.

"Not so fast," a voice hissed in his ear; "I haven't come all this way for the benefit of your society to lose you like this. You needn't worry about the door, because you can't escape in that way."

In a sudden frenzy of rage and anger and fear, Ravenspur stretched out his arm and encountered that of the mysterious stranger, whose dramatic entrance had so startled him. But, strong man as he was, and in the pink of good condition, Ravenspur could make nothing of his assailant. The man appeared to be not more than half his size, but his arms and body were tough and elastic as the finest whipcord. Gradually Ravenspur was borne backward. He dropped on his knees with a grip about his throat that caused him to gasp for breath, and brought a million stars dancing before his eyes. He wanted help more earnestly than he had ever required it in his life before, but his pride was stubborn still, and he tried to choke down the cry which rose to his lips. He must fight for himself to the end.

"So that is to be the end of it?" Vera asked. "It breaks my heart to speak like this, but after what Lord Ravenspur has said, there must be an end to the matter."

"But, my dearest girl, the thing is absurd," Walter cried. "What have we done that we should be treated in this way? Surely our position is clear enough. We are to be parted for the sake of some ridiculous whim which is not even capable of an explanation. I am not going to leave matters here. I decline to obey until I know the reason why. At any rate, nothing can prevent our loving each other. And, as far as I am concerned, I am quite prepared to keep the matter secret between us. But I intend to have the matter out with my uncle before I sleep tonight. I am not a boy to be treated in this sentimental fashion. So long as I know that your feelings remain unchanged----"

"What is that?" Vera cried. "Didn't you hear anything--a kind of horrible muffled scream? There it is again."

The sound came again and again, ringing through the silent house, horrible and insistent in its note of tragedy. Vera turned a pale,

scared face to her companion.

"Where is it?" she gasped. "Where does it come from?"

"The studio," Walter exclaimed. "It is my uncle's voice. Something terrible has happened to him."

Without another word Walter dashed from the room, and flew along the corridor leading to the studio. Just for a moment there was a strained, tense silence; then, as the door of the studio was reached, a strange, muffled scream burst out again. With his hand on the lock Walter shook the door, which refused to give way to him. He called aloud on Ravenspur, but no reply came. He shook the door in a fit of angry exasperation, and once more from inside the room came that queer, choking noise, followed by a low chuckle. It was maddening, exasperating to a degree, to stand so close to the threshold of tragedy and yet to be so far away.

There was only one thing for it, and that was to break down the door. Flinging himself full against the woodwork, Walter literally forced his way in. Then he stood just for a moment looking into the gloom and darkness, trying to see where the figure of the unhappy man lay.

CHAPTER VII.

THE YELLOW HAND-BILL.

The suggestion of tragedy brooding in the darkness held Lance back just for the moment. He was almost afraid to proceed lest he should find something even worse than he had expected. Then his hand fumbled along the wall with the switches, and the great room burst into a glow of light again.

The place was absolutely empty, save for the figure of Lord Ravenspur huddled up upon the Persian rug. He was absolutely still and silent. As far as Lance could see he had ceased to breathe.

Naturally enough the young man looked about him for a sign of the miscreant, but the studio contained no trace of his presence. The thing was puzzling to the last degree. There was no exit from the room beyond the door which Walter had broken down, and nobody could possibly have passed him that way. Besides, the switches were just inside the door, and the light had been turned on almost immediately. At any rate, there was nobody there now except the victim of the attack himself, and Walter feared that he was already past any explanation of the strange affair.

That would have to keep for the present. Walter bent over and raised Lord Ravenspur's head and shoulders. He was still alive, for his eyes were wide open, though no words came from his lips. At the same time he seemed to be struggling for speech which would not come. Then he raised a shaking arm and contrived to pull Walter's head down close to his lips. The words came at length in a faint whisper, a whisper so low, that Walter had the greatest difficulty in following it.

"Don't let anybody know. It is absolutely necessary that no one should know," Lord Ravenspur faltered. "If there is any alarm, I pray you go and allay it at once. Say that I had fallen asleep and was suffering from nightmare. Say I had a horrible dream. Say anything, so long as you respect my secret. Now go."

There was nothing to do but to obey this mysterious request. At the end of the corridor Vera was waiting with an anxious face. It was no nice thing to prevaricate, it would have to be done. Walter spoke as lightly as possible.

"There is no occasion for alarm," he said. "Lord Ravenspur says that he fell asleep and had a horrible nightmare. At any rate, he seems to be all right now. You had better go to bed. I am sorry that you should have been so much alarmed."

To Walter's great relief, Vera asked no further questions. She turned away obediently enough, and he hurried back to the studio. Lord Ravenspur still lay on the Persian rug, but with Walter's help he contrived to get into a chair. A little brandy brought some trace of colour to his face. He seemed more like himself again. "They heard nothing in the house?" he asked anxiously.

"Only Vera," Walter explained. "She was terribly frightened, but she believed what I told her, and she has gone up to her room. And now, perhaps, you will tell me the truth."

"Do you think I have not already done so?"

"My dear uncle, I am sure of it. I know it is possible for people to make the most hideous noises when they are suffering from nightmare, but this is quite another matter. You called aloud for help. You were in imminent danger of losing your life. Before I broke the door down I distinctly heard somebody give a low chuckle. Of course, you can make light of this in the morning. You can induce people to laugh at your absurd situation, but you cannot deceive me. I know there was someone in the room when I forced the door."

"Then where is he now, Walter?" Lord Ravenspur asked.

"Ah, that I cannot tell; but he was here right enough."

"He passed you in the corridor?"

"That he most certainly did not. Nobody came out that way."

A faint smile came to Lord Ravenspur's lips. He indicated the room with a wave of his hand.

"I see exactly what you mean," Walter said. "Of course, if you do not feel inclined to tell me the truth I cannot compel you to do so. But I have only to look at you, to see that you have lately been through a desperate struggle with someone who came here to take your life. You are absolutely exhausted with the severity of it. If I had my own way I would put the matter in the hands of the police."

"No, no," Ravenspur said vehemently. "If you have the slightest regard for me you will not venture to say a word to a soul. I want the whole thing to be forgotten. If I remain in my room all tomorrow under the plea of indisposition, I shall be all right the next day. You are to give me your word of honour that you will say nothing of what you have seen tonight."

"If you wish it so, certainly," Walter said reluctantly.

"My dear uncle, won't you trust me? I would do anything to help you. And besides, how are you going to guard against this happening again?"

"A bloodthirsty ruffian who can enter a house and vanish in this mysterious fashion, is not likely to be put off, if he knows you are going to take no steps to guard yourself against a further attack. But what has become of him?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Ravenspur said wearily. "I was sitting in my chair when the light suddenly went out and I heard the door locked. Then I had to fight for my life, and was nearly done for when I called out for assistance."

"And you saw nothing of him?" Walter asked.

"Nothing whatever," Ravenspur went on. "I could only feel him. And after that I recollect no more till you came."

"A most extraordinary thing," Walter said, somewhat impatiently. "Surely you have some idea as to who the man is. Surely he must be the same man who mistook Sir James Seton for yourself tonight."

No reply came from Lord Ravenspur. Evidently he desired to say no more. He seemed anxious to be alone. But Walter, angry and hurt, walked rapidly about the room seeking for a way whereby the late visitor had vanished. But he looked in vain. There was no possible means of exit other than the door, and the fireplace was too narrow to admit of anybody coming or going. As to the roof, it was of heavy stained glass, and as impregnable as the walls themselves. The mystery was maddening. And yet the one man who could have explained it all sat there silent, and moody, and tongue tied.

"Is there anything more that I can do for you before I go to bed?" Walter asked. "Are you sure I can't help you?"

"I am afraid not, my boy," Ravenspur said in a dull, mechanical way. "I know that you won't chatter about this thing. And, perhaps, a little later on, I shall be able to speak more plainly. I shall be glad if you will help me up the stairs and get me into bed. I have had a great shock tonight."

It seemed almost cruel to pursue the subject further, and Walter refrained from questions as he noticed the ghastly whiteness of his uncle's face. The latter was disposed of at length, and then Walter came downstairs again. He now had the house practically to himself. All desire for sleep had forsaken him. Besides that, it was no nice thought to reflect on the possibility of that ruffian being still on the premises. Walter had not the slightest doubt in his mind that the man had left the studio in some secret manner, and that he had come there through no ordinary channel. What was to prevent him returning again when the house was asleep and finishing his work?

In itself, the fact of Lord Ravenspur possessing a bitter enemy was remarkable. And Lord Ravenspur's obstinate silence was more remarkable still. Walter had given his word to say nothing of these strange events, but that did not bind him from making inquiries on his own account.

He returned to the studio once more and made a thoroughly searching examination of the place. Was there some secret door which Lord Ravenspur used, and of which nobody knew anything? It had never occurred to Walter till that moment that his uncle might have turned-down pages in his life, but that conclusion was inevitable now. Still, though Walter spent the best part of an hour in his search, he had nothing to show for his pains. He was about to give up the thing in despair when a piece of yellow paper, lying by the side of the Persian rug where Lord Ravenspur had fallen, attracted his attention. It was a small, shabby sheet of paper, folded in four and printed from worn-out type, in fact, just the class of bill which is circulated amongst travelling circuses and shows of that kind. It was the last thing in the world that anyone would have looked for in the studio of so fastidious a man as Lord Ravenspur. Slowly and thoughtfully Walter unfolded and read the handbill. It was an advertisement of the nightly programme of the Imperial Palace Theatre. The name of the place sounded imposing enough, but the locality of Vauxhall Bridge Road somewhat detracted from the importance of it. So far as Walter could judge, the Imperial Palace Theatre was no more than a shady music hall giving two shows a night, and most of the names on the bill were absolutely unknown to fame. The star turn appeared to be one Valdo, who was announced as the flying man who had made such a sensation throughout the leading halls in Europe.

"I wonder if this is a clue," Walter murmured to himself. "At any rate, I should like to see this Valdo. I'll go down to the Imperial Palace tomorrow night and enquire for myself."

Walter folded up the shabby bill and placed it in his pocket, after which he went thoughtfully to bed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

Nobody in the Park Lane house appeared to have the slightest suspicion that anything had been wrong. The stolid, well-trained servants accepted the explanation of the broken door quite as a matter of course. And when Vera had come down in the morning she appeared to have forgotten the incident entirely. Lord Ravenspur was not feeling particularly well, and he had decided to keep to his room for the day. The explanation was perfectly simple and quite natural. All the same, Walter was thankful that Vera should ask him no questions. It was no easy matter to preserve a cheerful and unconcerned face at the breakfast table, but he seemed to manage it all right. He was just a little quiet and subdued, but then there was nothing remarkable about that, especially in view of Lord Ravenspur's feelings on the subject of his engagement to Vera.

The day dragged on, and Walter waited with what patience he had till the evening. He was not displeased to find that Vera was dining out with some friends in Sloane Square, for this would give him the opportunity he needed. He changed his dinner jacket presently for an old tweed coat and cap. Then he set out on his errand in Vauxhall Bridge Road. Walter was not alone on this occasion, for he was accompanied by a journalist friend whose particular study was the life and habits of the lower classes. It was this friend who had

suggested the advisability of the humble garb, so that they could thus mix freely with the people around them. Walter congratulated himself upon his friend's prudence when he saw the class of audience that filled the Imperial Palace Theatre.

The place was large enough, and by no means lacked artistic finish. At one time it had been an actual theatre, run by some enthusiast with a view to the elevation of the masses and the production of high-class plays at popular prices. The experiment had ended in a ghastly failure, and now a shrewd, hard-headed publican in the neighbourhood was making a fortune by the simple expedient of giving his patrons exactly what they required.

"What part of the house shall we try?" Walter asked.

"We can't do better than the pit," Venables replied. "That will cost you sixpence, or perhaps, if you like to be extravagant, we can have a box for half-a-crown. Still, we don't want to make ourselves conspicuous. The pit is quite good enough for me. You can smoke here, you know, and drink too, for the matter of that. But I should not advise you to try the latter experiment."

The house was fairly well filled as the two friends entered and took their seats. The audience for the most part were respectable enough, but the whole place reeked with perspiring humanity, and the air was pungent with the smell of acrid tobacco. A constant fusillade of chaff went on between the stage and the audience. Indeed, the artistes, for the most part, appeared to be on the most friendly terms with the *habitués* of the theatre. A dreary-looking comedian was singing one of the inevitable patter songs, full of the feeble allusions to drink without which songs of that kind never appear to be complete. The audience listened stolidly enough.

"Are they never going to tire of this kind of thing?" Walter asked his companion. "Is there nothing humorous in the world outside the region of too much beer? These people sadden me."

"Oh, they are all right," Venables said, cheerfully. "They are quite happy in their own particular way. I have long ceased to look for anything fresh on the music hall stage. An original artist and an original manner wouldn't be tolerated."

The dreary song came to an end at length; then it was followed by two so-called sisters, who, in short skirts and large picture hats, discoursed of the joys of country life in a peculiarly aggressive Cockney accent. The whole thing was dull and depressing to the last degree, and Walter began to regret his loss of time. He noticed from his programme that Valdo was down rather late, so there was nothing for it but to possess his soul in patience till the time came. It was a little past ten o'clock before the stage was cleared, and the attendants, in their grimy uniforms, began to erect a series of fine wires running from the roof to the floor. Then there was an extra flourish from the aggressive orchestra, and a slim man, dressed entirely in black, came on to the stage. He was received with great enthusiasm and the smiting of glasses upon the tables. Evidently Valdo had established himself as a firm favourite with the patrons of the Imperial Palace Theatre.

All Walter's apathy had vanished, as he turned to the stage and scrutinised the acrobat long and carefully. So far as he could judge, Valdo was no Englishman with a foreign name, but a genuine foreigner, presumably of Italian birth. The man was not tall or particularly broad, but he was well proportioned, and gave the idea of one possessed of considerable physical strength. In particular, Walter noticed how long his arms were, and how the muscles stood out between his shoulders. As to the rest, the man looked mild enough, and his dark Southern face was wreathed in an amiable smile.

He proceeded, with the aid of an attendant, to fasten two small curved canvas frames to his shoulders. These he thrashed up and down with his arms much as a cock flaps its wings before crowing.

Then, with an agile leap from the stage, the man proceeded to sail up slowly from the floor to the flies.

"That's clever," Venables exclaimed. "It looks to me as if our friend has solved the art of the flying machine. But one never knows. I daresay it is no more than some ingenious trick."

This speech appeared to be resented by a respectable-looking mechanic who was occupying the next seat to Venables.

"Nothing of the kind," the man said indignantly. "I've been here three nights now, and I know something about mechanics, too. If you think that wires are used you are just mistaken. A friend of mine is stage carpenter here, and he told me all about it. Depend upon it, that chap has got the knack right enough."

The performer fluttered down again from the wings as lightly and easily as he had risen, and a tremendous outbreak of applause followed. When the din had died away, the stage manager came forward and invited any of the audience who chose to come up and see for themselves that everything was fair and legitimate, and that no mechanism had been employed. The intelligent mechanic turned to Venables with a defiant smile.

"Now is your chance, guv'nor," he exclaimed. "You go and smell it out for yourself."

Venables would have declined the offer, but already Walter had risen eagerly from his seat. The opportunity was too good to be missed. Though he did not associate this man Valdo with the mysterious attack on Lord Ravenspur's life, he felt quite convinced that the artist was indirectly concerned in it. To waste a chance would be the height of folly. A moment or two later the two friends were on the stage. They stood there whilst the performer went through another series of graceful performances, but they could see absolutely nothing which suggested mechanical contrivance of any kind. The

whole act came to an end at length, and Valdo stood there bowing and smiling when his wings were removed.

"Let's have a chat with him," Venables whispered. "Apart from the thing being decidedly interesting, there ought to be some good 'copy' here. Properly worked, Signor Valdo ought to be worth a couple of columns to me."

At the suggestion of the "Press," the stage manager pricked up his ears. He was not insensible to the value of a good advertisement. He suggested a move to his private office, where it would be possible for the visitors to interview quietly.

"Nothing I should like better," Walter said eagerly. "Perhaps you will come with us, and join us in a bottle of champagne?"

They made their way behind the stage to a dingy little room, insufficiently lighted with one gas jet. The back of the stage was in a turmoil. It was almost impossible to hear for the din. Then very briefly and modestly Valdo told his history. He had found out his peculiar powers by a series of experiments with the parachute. The whole secret lay, he explained, in the enormously powerful muscles between his shoulders and the backs of his arms. The rest was worked by the amazing rapidity with which he had learnt to move his arms. So far the thing was effective enough, but the strain was so great that, hitherto, he had found it impossible to rise to a height of more than forty feet. This naturally prevented him from obtaining engagements in the larger theatres and halls where so limited a flight would have been far less imposing than it appeared to be when performed in a place like the Imperial Palace. There was nothing more to be said, and the two friends were turning away when a woman put her head into the door, and looked inquiringly at Valdo. He muttered something to the effect that he would be ready in a moment or two, and the woman vanished.

Walter caught his lip in his teeth. It was hard work to conceal his surprise. There was no doubt whatever about it, no question as to the identity of the intruder. Strange as it appeared to be, Walter recognised the features of Mrs. Delahay. There was no mistaking that white, stern face. It was only for a moment, but that moment had been enough for Lance.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONFIDENTIAL AGENT.

All that evening and most of the next day Walter brooded over his startling discovery. He said nothing to anybody about it, though he had attempted the night previously to follow up the clue. The attempt had failed, however, for though Walter had waited outside the theatre, he saw no more of Mrs. Delahay. And as to the man Valdo he eventually went off by himself. There was nothing for it now but to wait and see what was going to happen.

Meanwhile, public interest in the Fitzjohn Square tragedy had not abated in the least. Everybody was waiting eagerly enough for the inquest, which was to open at four o'clock on the day following the mysterious attack upon Lord Ravenspur. The latter had come down somewhat late in the morning, looking but little the worse for his adventure. It was not expected that the inquest would be more than formally opened, and it was generally known that Lord Ravenspur would be an important witness.

In view of the extraordinary interest taken in the affair the proceedings had been moved to a public hall. Long before the time arranged for opening the hall was packed to its utmost capacity. After the police and medical evidence had been taken, the first witness called was Lord Ravenspur. His fine, picturesque figure stood out in the strong light. He gave his evidence clearly and well, though his voice shook from time to time with emotion, which was only natural enough, seeing that the dead man had been so close a friend of his.

After all, he had little to tell. He described his late visit to Fitzjohn Square, and how he had been at work on a picture there until such time as the lights were extinguished and he was forced to abandon his task.

"You thought nothing of the lights going out?" the coroner asked. "You saw nothing suspicious in that?"

"Well, no," the witness replied. "You see, it is no unusual occurrence for the supply of electric light to fail. The thing so easily happens. As the house has been empty for some time it occurred to me that perhaps there was a fault somewhere, or, perhaps, the workmen had not quite finished their job."

"Quite so," the coroner observed. "Tell us, did you hear any noise in the house, or any suspicious sounds?"

"Nothing whatever. Until the light went out there was nothing whatever to disturb me. In fact, I was so intent upon my work that I was quite lost to everything else."

"But you know now," the coroner went on, "that the main cable leading to the meter was cut. That being so, somebody must have been in the house at the same time as yourself. What I want to get at is this--the murderer was deliberately waiting for his victim. He had no quarrel with you, and his great idea was to get you out of the way. That appears to be obvious."

"It is obvious enough to me," Ravenspur replied. "I came to that conclusion directly Inspector Dallas pointed out to me that the main cable had been deliberately cut. But you see I suspected nothing wrong at the time, and there was nothing else for me to do but to abandon my task directly the light went out. I am afraid that I can tell you nothing more."

"The deceased was a great friend of yours?" the coroner asked. "I presume you know a great deal about his life and habits. Was he at all the sort of man to make enemies?"

"The last man in the world," the witness said emphatically. "My friend was both upright and straightforward. Indeed, I regarded him as a man incapable of a mean action."

One or two desultory questions followed, and then Lord Ravenspur sat down. To a certain extent his evidence had been dramatic enough, but, at the same time, he had not said a single word likely to throw any light on the mystery. The audience thrilled and bent forward eagerly as Mrs. Delahay stood up to give her evidence. She was just as deadly pale, just as calm and set, as she had been when she called upon Ravenspur in Park Lane with the dreadful news. She gave her evidence slowly and distinctly, speaking more like an automaton than a creature of flesh and blood. She told how she had become alarmed at her husband's prolonged absence, how she had gone down to Fitzjohn Square to see if anything had happened, how she found the dead body there, and how the police had come to her assistance. But more than that she could not say, more than that she did not know. So far as she knew her husband had always been a cheerful man. She had never heard him say an evil word of any one. She had not been married long, in fact she was still a bride. Altogether she had known her husband for a little over three years. She was older than her husband, she proceeded to say. The coroner asked her age.

"I am forty-three," she said calmly.

"Really," the coroner murmured politely, "I should not have taken you to be so much. I don't wish to ask you anything likely to cause you pain, but does it not occur to you that your husband might have been concealing something? Is it not rather strange that he should leave you at midnight and take an hour and a half in reaching a house to which he might have walked in ten minutes?"

"I don't think so," Mrs. Delahay said. "My husband was one of the most open of men. In fact, he was too fond of leaving his letters and private papers about. And as to the rest, he might have met a friend. He might have gone to one of his clubs."

"If I may be allowed to interrupt a moment," Inspector Dallas said, "I may say that we have utterly failed to trace Mr. Delahay's movements from the time he left the Grand Hotel till he reached Fitzjohn Square. Not one of his friends appears to have seen him on the night in question."

"That is rather unfortunate," the coroner murmured. "I am sorry to have troubled you so far. You may sit down now."

With something which might have been a sigh of relief Mrs. Delahay resumed her seat close to the table. Then Inspector Dallas put forward a witness who gave the name of John Stevens. He looked like a broken-down professional man in his greasy, shabby frock-coat and dingy linen. His watery eye glanced nervously over the court. The red tinge on his cheeks spoke quite plainly of the cause of his downfall. He proceeded to give his evidence so incoherently that the coroner had to reprimand him sharply once or twice.

"I can't hear half you say," that official said irritably. "I think you said your name was John Stevens. What can you tell us about this case? Did you know Mr. Delahay?"

"I knew him quite well, sir," the witness said. "I have seen him scores of times when I have been watching in Fitzjohn Square."

"What do you mean by watching there?"

"Well, sir, you see, I am a private inquiry agent. I work for one of the large firms of detectives, getting up evidence and that kind of thing. For months past it has been my duty to keep my eye on a certain house in the Square, especially at night. In that way I have got to know most of the inhabitants by sight, and also I have got to know a good deal about their habits."

"You are a professional spy, then?" the coroner asked.

"Well, sir, if you like to put it like that," the witness said humbly. "On the night of the murder about a quarter past one, I was in the Square gardens watching through the railings at the corner of John Street. I could see perfectly well what was going on because there is a large electric arc light where John Street and the Square adjoin. As I said, it was just about a quarter past one, because I looked at my watch to see what the time was. It was nearly time for me to leave, as my instructions----"

The witness broke off abruptly, and glanced about the room with the air of a man who has recognised an acquaintance whom he had not expected to see. His rambling attentions were recalled by the coroner in a few sharp words.

"I am sure I beg your pardon. As I said, I was waiting there till my time was up, and I saw Mr. Delahay come round the corner. He stood there just a moment. As far as I could gather he seemed to be troubled about something. I was too far off to hear what he was saying, but it seemed to me----"

"What are you talking about?" the coroner interrupted. "Do you mean to say that Mr. Delahay was talking to himself?"

"Oh, dear no, sir; he was talking to his companion."

"Companion! That is the first we have heard of that. Was the companion a man or a woman, might I ask?"

"It was a lady, sir. She was a tall woman dressed in black. They stood opposite me for five or six minutes talking very earnestly together. Then Mr. Delahay turned away from the woman and went into the house. The woman seemed to hesitate a few moments, then she followed, and I saw her go into the house after Mr. Delahay. But she will be able to tell you all about it herself."

"I don't understand you," the coroner said, with a puzzled frown. "How can the woman tell us all about it herself? You don't mean to say that she is in court?"

The witness slowly turned and pointed a dingy forefinger in the direction of Maria Delahay.

"That's the lady, sir," he said. "That's the lady that I saw with Mr. Delahay the night before last."

"But that is absolutely impossible," the coroner cried. "Don't you know that that lady is Mr. Delahay's wife?"

CHAPTER X.

ROPES OF SAND.

Something like a thrill of real excitement ran through the spectators. The remark was made so quietly and in such a natural tone, that nobody dreamt of questioning the word of the witness. Then it went home to all that Stevens was making against Mrs. Delahay what amounted to a serious accusation. All eyes were turned upon her. She glanced in the direction of the witness in the same, dull, steady way which had characterised her from the first.

"This is very remarkable," the coroner murmured. "Do you quite understand what you are saying?"

"Why, of course, sir," Stevens went on, as if absolutely unconscious that his words were creating a sensation. "That is the lady whom I saw with Mr. Delahay that night. I daresay she will tell you herself when she comes to give evidence."

"One moment, please," the coroner went on. "How long is it since you identified the lady opposite?"

The witness looked about him as if he hardly understood the question. He was clearly puzzled by what had happened.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I did not see her till the last few moments. You see, sir, I took her for a witness like myself. I cannot say any more than that."

The coroner murmured something to the effect that there must be a mistake here. Then he turned to the witness again.

"This is a most important investigation," he said, "and I want you to be very careful. Will you look at the lady again and see if you have not made a mistake? Surely you were in court when she gave her evidence. You must have seen her then."

"Indeed, I didn't, sir," the witness protested. "I did not come into court until my name was called outside."

The coroner turned sharply to Mrs. Delahay and asked her to be good enough to stand up. She rose slowly and deliberately, and turned her head in the direction of Stevens. A ray of light fell upon her features; they were absolutely dull and expressionless, as if all the life had gone out of her; as if she failed utterly to comprehend what was going on around her. It was only natural that she should have dissented vigorously from Stevens' statement. She regarded him without even the suggestion of a challenge in her eyes. As a matter of fact, the man was making a serious charge against her--a charge of wilful perjury at the very least, and yet, so far as she was concerned, Stevens did not even appear to exist.

"Well, what do you make of it?" the coroner asked.

"Just as I told you before," the witness went on. "I saw that lady with Mr. Delahay at a quarter past one on the morning of the murder. I saw her enter the house in Fitzjohn Square."

"Extraordinary!" the coroner exclaimed. "Mrs. Delahay has already sworn to the fact that she retired to bed at twelve o'clock, and that she did not miss her husband till late the next morning; and now you say that you saw her with the murdered man. In the face of Mrs. Delahay's evidence, are you prepared to repeat your first statement?"

A stubborn look came over Stevens' face. His watery eyes became more clear and steadfast.

"I have no object in telling a lie, sir," he said. "I came forward in what I considered to be the interests of justice, and at some loss to myself. I am prepared to stand up in any Court of Justice, and take my oath that Mrs. Delahay was with her husband at the time and place I have mentioned."

The audience swayed again, for there was something exceedingly impressive in the speaker's words. All eyes were turned upon Mrs. Delahay, who seemed at length to gain some understanding of what was going on. There was no sign of guilt or confusion on her face. It was as calm and stony as ever.

"The speaker is absolutely mistaken," she said. "He must have confused me with somebody else. From twelve o'clock at night till seven the next morning I was not out of my room."

"On the face of what has happened, we cannot possibly go any further," the coroner said. "After all it will be an easy matter to test the correctness of both witnesses. It is just possible that Stevens has made a mistake."

Stevens shook his head doggedly. He felt quite certain that there was no mistake so far as he was concerned. Then there was a little awkward pause, followed by a whispered consultation between the coroner and Inspector Dallas.

"The enquiry is adjourned for a week," the coroner announced. "There is nothing to be gained by any further investigation till the extraordinary point which has arisen has been settled."

The disappointed audience filed out until only a few of the authorities from Scotland Yard remained. As Mrs. Delahay walked slowly towards the door, Inspector Dallas followed her.

"You will excuse me, I am sure," he said, "but I should like to come back to your hotel with you and make a few inquiries. You see, it is absolutely necessary to disprove John Stevens' statements. Until we have done that, we can't carry our investigations any further. I hope you will be able to help us in this matter."

"How can I help you?" the woman asked in the same dull, level voice. "I tell you that man was mistaken. I am still so dazed and stunned by my loss that I am quite incapable of following things clearly. Something seems to have gone wrong with my brain. But I will try and help you. It is very strange that that man should have made such an extraordinary mistake."

"Very strange indeed," Dallas murmured. "Will you permit me to call you a cab? Now tell me, have you any relations? For instance, have you a sister who is very like you? In one of the most important investigations I ever undertook, I was utterly baffled for months owing to the fact of there being two twin brothers mixed up in the case. If you have a sister----"

"So far as I know I have not a single female relative in the world," Mrs. Delahay responded. "And as to the rest, you will find that my statement is absolutely true. I suppose you will believe the servants at the hotel?"

The hotel was reached at length, and Mrs. Delahay excused herself on the ground that she was tired and utterly worn out. So far as Dallas was concerned he had no desire to detain her. As a matter of fact, he wanted to pursue his inquiries alone, and on the production of his card the resources of the establishment were placed at his disposal. Nothing seemed to escape his eye. No detail appeared to be too trivial. He received his reward at length through the lips of one of the chambermaids who had something to say. As was only natural, there was not a servant on the premises who had not heard all about the Fitzjohn Square tragedy, or who was not deeply interested in Mrs. Delahay.

"It is your duty to look after the rooms on the same floor as Mrs. Delahay's bedroom?" he asked. "What time did you retire on the night of the murder?"

"Not before two o'clock," the chambermaid replied. "We were unusually late that night as the house was full."

"Quite so. I suppose when Mr. and Mrs. Delahay came in from the theatre they got the key of their bedroom from the office in the ordinary way? I suppose they had a dressing room and a bedroom?"

The chambermaid admitted that such was the fact. When asked if she knew what time Mrs. Delahay had retired for the night, she shook her head. She "could not be quite sure."

"You see, it was like this," she said. "I was rather interested in Mr. and Mrs. Delahay--they were such a distinguished looking couple. I was in the corridor when Mr. Delahay went out about twelve o'clock, and half an hour later I went up to Mrs. Delahay's bedroom to see if I could do anything for her. The key was in the door, which struck me as rather strange, because, as you know, in large hotels like this, it is the customary thing for people to lock their rooms. I knocked at the door and no reply came, so I went in. The bed and dressing room were both empty, and thinking, perhaps, that Mrs. Delahay had gone out as well as her husband, I turned the key in the door and took it down to the office."

A thoughtful expression came over Inspector Dallas' face.

"That was quite the proper thing to do," he said. "I suppose you don't know what time the key was fetched again from the office?"

"Oh, that I cannot tell you. You see, I went to bed about two o'clock and I was up again at seven. When I took Mrs. Delahay up her cup of early tea she was in bed then."

"Really! Did you notice anything strange about her?"

"There was nothing to notice. She appeared to be very bright and cheerful, and chatted to me in the friendliest possible way. She did say something to the effect that she was a little uneasy about her husband, who had not yet returned, and that she must go and look for him. But beyond that I saw nothing that was in the least out of the common."

"I think that will do," Dallas observed. "I won't detain you any longer. I know how busy you are."

Dallas went straight away downstairs and interviewed the clerk in the office. The latter's memory was a little vague on the subject of the coming and going of the various hotel guests. There were hundreds of them in the course of a week, and it was the habit of most of them to leave the key of their rooms in the office every time they went out. The speaker had no recollection of Mrs. Delahay calling for her key very late on the night of the tragedy. He debated the point thoughtfully for a moment, then his face lighted up.

"I think I can help you," he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EXPRESS LETTER.

"Take your time," Dallas said, encouragingly. "I don't want to hurry you. All I want are facts."

"It is beginning to come to me now," the clerk said thoughtfully. "Yes, I remember it quite distinctly. You see, Madam Leona Farre, the great French actress, is staying in the house, and she did not come in till just two o'clock. After I had given her her key Mrs. Delahay came up and asked who the lady was. She wanted her key, too, which she told me was missing from the door of her room."

"Oh, indeed," Dallas said softly. "She had just come in, I suppose? Had she taken off her things?"

"No," the clerk said. "She had just come in from the street. I had to explain to her how it was that the key had found its way back into the office again."

"She did not appear to be annoyed at that?"

"Not in the least. Indeed, she seemed to be rather amused at her own carelessness. No, I saw nothing suspicious in her manner. I think that is all I can tell you."

"Possibly," Dallas said. "But there is one other little matter in which you may be of assistance. I suppose you can recollect the night that Mr. Delahay left the hotel. Did he happen to ask for letters or anything of that kind? It would be quite the usual thing to do. Of course, it is a small point----"

"There were no post letters," the clerk interrupted. "But just as Mr. Delahay was going out a messenger boy brought an express letter for him, which he read hastily, and then asked the hall porter to call him a cab. No, I can't say that the message disturbed him at all, but it seemed to hurry him up a bit just as a telegram might have done. That was the last I saw of him."

On the whole Inspector Dallas was not disposed to be dissatisfied with his morning's work. He had discovered some important facts, and, at any rate, it had impressed the detective with the truth of John Stevens' evidence. As to the rest, it would not be a difficult

matter to find out the name and number of the messenger boy who had brought the unfortunate Delahay that letter. There was nothing for it now but to take a cab and go off in the direction of the district office whence the messenger boy had come. As Dallas walked briskly down the steps of the hotel he met Lord Ravenspur coming up.

"I am just going to see Mrs. Delahay," the latter said. "By the way, Inspector, that was remarkable evidence which the witness Stevens volunteered this morning. But, of course, he was mistaken. It is absolutely impossible that Mrs. Delahay could have been with her husband at the time he stated."

"Well, I am not so sure of that, my lord," Dallas replied. "Really, I don't know what to make of it. At any rate, I have discovered an absolute fact: that for two hours, between twelve and two, Mrs. Delahay was not in the hotel. I have it on the independent testimony of two witnesses who corroborate one another down to the minutest detail. I don't know what to make of it."

All the healthy colour left Ravenspur's face.

"This is amazing," he said. "Yet I cannot believe that Mrs. Delahay has been deliberately deceiving us. I will go up and see what she has to say for herself. I suppose I am at liberty to tell her what you have just said to me?"

"I don't know why not," Dallas said after a thoughtful pause. "You see, she is bound to know sooner or later. And I hope you will make her see the advisability of accounting for her movements. Nothing can be gained by trying to deceive us, to say nothing of the wrong impression which Mrs. Delahay is creating in the minds of other people. Really, if you come to think of it, she is standing in an exceedingly perilous position, my lord."

Ravenspur was not destined to make any impression upon the widow of his unfortunate friend, for she refused to see him. One of the servants came down with a message to the effect that Mrs.

Delahay could not see anybody. Even a letter hastily scribbled by Ravenspur failed to induce her to change her mind. With something like despair in his heart Ravenspur went off in the direction of his own house. For the rest of the afternoon he sat in the library, a prey to his own gloomy thoughts. Visitors came and went, but the same message was given to all of them--Lord Ravenspur was far from well. He could not see anybody this afternoon. It was nearly seven o'clock before Walter Lance came into the library.

"I am sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I have something serious to say to you. I have been reading to-day's evidence in the Delahay case, and I was so interested in the matter that I went to Scotland Yard and had a chat with Inspector Dallas. It seems to me that Mrs. Delahay has placed herself in a very compromising position."

"What do you mean by that?" Ravenspur demanded.

"Surely, my dear uncle, the thing is plain enough. Whatever your opinion of Mrs. Delahay may be you cannot get away from the fact that she was deliberately lying when she gave her evidence this morning. She swore that on the night of the murder she wasn't out of her bedroom after twelve o'clock, and we know now that she was away from the hotel for over two hours. You know it, too, because Dallas told you. You will forgive my plain speaking, sir, but I think you could throw some light on this painful tragedy. Believe me, I should not dare to say so much if----"

"You are presumptuous," Ravenspur said angrily. "Do you dare to insinuate that a man in my position----"

"I am not insinuating anything," Walter urged. "But I have a feeling we are in some way connected with this tragedy. I have a strange instinct that there is some close connection between the death of Mr. Delahay and that mysterious murderous attack upon you in your studio. Oh, I know that commonsense is all against my theory, but I am going to tell you something which will astonish you. After I saw

you to bed the other night I searched the studio for some way whereby an assailant could have entered the room--I mean some secret door known only to yourself----"

"You can disabuse your mind of that idea," Ravenspur said, with the ghost of a smile. "I give you my word that there is nothing of the sort. But go on with your story."

"Well, I couldn't find any means of entrance and exit except by the door, and then it occurred to me that I might possibly light upon a clue. Finally I found this lying on the floor, and I should like you to read it. You may find it interesting."

With these words Walter took from his pocket the dingy yellow handbill, and laid it open on the table so that Ravenspur might read. The latter glanced at the printed words, and then turned to Walter with a questioning eye.

"What does it all mean?" he asked. "It conveys nothing whatever to me, and, even if it did, I am the last man in the world to patronise entertainments of that kind."

"You never heard of Valdo before, then?" Walter asked.

"Not I, my dear boy. Who is the fellow?"

"He is a kind of flying man. He is an individual with extraordinarily developed arms and muscles. He can move those arms almost as quickly as a fly does in its flight; with the aid of specially prepared wings he can flutter about a stage like a bird. I daresay there is some secret behind it all, but still the performance is very graceful and attractive, though, as yet, the man tells me his flight is limited to some thirty feet."

"He tells you!" Ravenspur exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that you have actually paid a visit to this theatre?"

"Certainly I have, sir. You see, I regarded this bill as a kind of clue. I knew that you could not possibly have brought it into the house, nor were any of your friends likely to do so. Therefore I came to the not illogical conclusion the other night that your assailant must have dropped it. The man who got into the studio must have been an extraordinary climber or something exceedingly clever in the way of an acrobat. In fact, just the sort of fellow who would be connected with music halls and circuses and places of that kind. That is why I went down to the Imperial Palace Theatre together with a journalist friend of mine who takes an interest in such matters. The only item of the entertainment worth watching was this man Valdo, and, of course, up to a certain point I did not identify him with the outrage upon yourself."

"Why should you do so now?" Ravenspur asked. "I told you that I have never seen or heard of the man, nor does he answer to any acquaintance of mine. Why, then, should you go out of your way to suggest that he had even been here?"

"I am coming to that," Walter said quietly. "I was so interested in the performance that I went round to Valdo's dressing-room afterwards, and had a long chat with him. Just before I came away a woman looked into the room, and asked the performer if he was ready, or something of that kind. She did not notice me; indeed, she did not even look in my direction. It was only just for a moment that I caught a glimpse of her face. It was only by a great effort that I concealed my feelings. And when I tell you that the woman I am speaking about was Mrs. Delahay----"

"Impossible!" Ravenspur cried in great agitation. "The thing is absolutely incredible. I cannot believe it."

"Nevertheless, I am stating nothing but the truth," Walter said. "As sure as I am standing here I saw Mrs. Delahay. And now you know why I am sure that there is something more behind this than has yet come to light."

CHAPTER XII.

A SPEAKING LIKENESS.

It was some little time before Lord Ravenspur replied. For a moment or two he seemed to be bereft of the gift of speech.

"It sounds almost incredible," he managed to stammer at length. "You are absolutely certain you are not mistaken?"

"No, I am not mistaken. Mrs. Delahay's face is far too striking a one to be taken for that of anybody else. Of course, I am not asking you to give me any information. I am not seeking to pry into your secrets; but this mystery maddens me. The most extraordinary part of the whole affair is this--for three years on and off I have known Mrs. Delahay intimately. I saw a great deal of her in Florence, also in Paris last year. And she has always given me the impression of being absolutely straightforward and single minded. And now, for some reason or another, she has taken it into her head to tell deliberate lies which appear to have no point or meaning. If she had only said that she went to call upon a friend after her husband had gone out, no further question would have been asked. Of course, I had not forgotten the evidence of the man Stevens. I must confess I should like to see him and ask him a few pointed questions. But apart from all that, you must see the necessity of getting Mrs. Delahay to tell the truth. It is just possible that she is shielding somebody. It is just possible that the whole thing is capable of explanation. But of that you are the best judge."

"It is a miserable business altogether," Ravenspur groaned. "I am obliged to you for the straightforward way in which you have told me everything, and I will do my best with Maria Delahay. She refused to see me this morning, but I will go round after dinner and make another attempt to get an interview."

It was somewhat later in the evening that Walter looked up his friend Venables again. As he expected, he found the journalist to be greatly interested in the Delahay case. Walter had debated the matter over in his mind. He could see no harm in telling Venables what he had discovered.

"It is certainly a curious case," the latter remarked. "And professional interests apart, I should like to get to the bottom of this mystery. But I see you have some suggestion to make in connection with it. What is your idea?"

"Well, I have been thinking it out as I came along," Walter explained; "and it seems to me that we might get a good deal out of the witness John Stevens. He is the sort of man who would do anything for money, and a sovereign or two ought to loosen his tongue. I don't want to say anything unkind about Louis Delahay, because he was a great friend of ours; and, so far as I know, his past is a clean and honourable one. But then you never can tell. What is a man like that doing to make an enemy, who is prepared to run the risk of being hanged for killing him? And why does he want to go round to his studio at such an hour in the morning?"

"I thought of all that," Venables said grimly. "Depend upon it, your unfortunate friend had some secret chapters in his life of which the world will probably never know anything. But what has all this got to do with that fellow Stevens?"

"I was just coming to that point. If I had been the coroner I should have asked Stevens a great many more questions this morning. As it was, the authorities seemed content to let him go after he had given

evidence to the effect that he had seen Mrs. Delahay with her husband. He told the court that he had been prowling and spying about Fitzjohn Square for some months, and he gave a pretty plain hint to the effect that he could tell a story or two about some of the inhabitants there. Now, for six months or more before Delahay went to Florence to be married, he lived a bachelor life at this house; and all this time Stevens was prowling about the neighbourhood after dark. It is not a very pleasant thing to have to do, but I should like to talk the matter over with Stevens and see if he can give us any information as regards Delahay. If you will telephone to Scotland Yard and get them to give you Stevens' address, we will go round to his rooms and interview him at once."

It was no difficult matter to get the address in question, and presently the two friends reached the shabby house in the dingy street where Stevens lived. An exceedingly dirty child informed the visitors that Mr. Stevens was out at present, but that he always left his whereabouts behind him in case he might be required professionally. At the present moment, the precocious child informed the strangers, Mr. Stevens could be found at the Imperial Palace Theatre in Vauxhall Bridge Road.

"That is a bit of a coincidence," Venables remarked. "However, we can't do better than go down to the theatre."

There was some little trouble in finding Stevens, and the performance was nearly at an end before he was pointed out to Walter by one of the attendants. He appeared to be none too sober, judging by his flushed face and somewhat unsteady gait; though, since the morning, his wardrobe had undergone a decided change for the better. The greasy, seedy frock-coat had vanished. Also the dilapidated silk hat. In fact the man looked quite prosperous.

"I would suggest that we don't speak to him in here," Venables said. "Let us follow him out into the road."

Walter fell in at once with the idea. In the road Stevens paused as if waiting for somebody, and presently from the stage door there appeared the slim, graceful figure of Valdo. For some moments the two men stood in earnest conversation together, and from their attitude it was plainly evident that they were in hot dispute upon some point. The discussion lasted some little time. Then with a shrug of his shoulders, Valdo put his hand in his pocket and passed a coin or two over to his companion. Stevens was understood to say something to the effect that that would suffice for the present. Then he lounged off down the road and paused presently before a public-house which glittered invitingly opposite.

"Catch him before he goes in there," Venables whispered hurriedly. "If the fellow has any more to drink he will be perfectly useless to us for the rest of the evening."

Stevens turned suspiciously as Walter spoke to him.

"I think your name is Stevens," the latter said. "My friend here is a journalist and is greatly interested in the Fitzjohn Square mystery. We have been reading your evidence of this morning, and have come to the conclusion that you may be able to afford us some useful information. If you will answer a few questions we will make it worth your while."

"To the extent of a couple of sovereigns," Venables put in.

"Then I am your man," Stevens exclaimed with alacrity. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind coming round as far as my rooms. I have got a pretty poor memory for things, so I always jot everything down in my diary. I put everything down pretty well, because you never know what information is likely to be useful. I once made fifty pounds out of the simple fact that I saw a footman reading some postcards he was posting. Since then I have neglected no trifles."

"What we want," Walter explained, "is all you can tell us about Mr. Louis Delahay. You know him very well by sight, and you must be

acquainted with some of his habits."

Stevens laughed knowingly, and nodded his head.

"I could open your eyes about a few of them in that neighbourhood," he said. "I haven't been loafing about Fitzjohn Square all these months for nothing. If I were a blackmailer, which I am not, I could live on the fat of the land. That is too dangerous a game to play, and I prefer to get along as I am."

The man was evidently in a condition when he was past concealing anything. He chattered away glibly until his rooms were reached. Then with a flourish he opened the door and invited his visitors to enter. He apologised for the fact that he had nothing whereon to entertain the strangers, which apology was duly accepted. It was, perhaps, on the whole, a fortunate thing that Stevens' cellar was empty. He ushered his companions into a grimy room, stuffy from want of air, and reeking with the odour of stale tobacco smoke.

"You will excuse me for a moment," he said politely. "I will go into my bedroom and get my diary. I suppose pretty well all you want to know has happened quite lately."

"It is the last six months with which we are chiefly concerned," Walter explained. "Before that does not matter."

Stevens turned away and closed the door behind him. He was gone some little time, so that his visitors had ample opportunity to take stock of their surroundings. There was nothing in the place of any value except a small circular picture in a handsome frame, depicting a beautiful face, which was evidently the work of some artist of repute. The painting was so glaringly out of place that it immediately attracted Venables' attention.

"How did that get here?" he asked.

"My word, you may well ask that," Walter cried in surprise. "Here is another amazing discovery! You remember my uncle being robbed of some pictures a few years ago, one of which he declared was the best thing he had ever done?"

"You don't mean to say," Venables exclaimed, "that, that----"

"Indeed, I do," Walter said under his breath. "I declare to you that the painting hanging up there is the one which my uncle always considered his masterpiece."

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRIKING LIKENESS.

Venables regarded the painting with deep interest. All his journalistic instincts were now aroused. It appeared to him that he was on the eve of tapping a perfect gold mine of sensational "copy."

"Now are you quite sure you are not making a mistake?" he asked. "You have not been misled by some chance likeness, because this is rather an important matter for me. My people expect smartness, but they have a rooted objection to mistakes."

"I tell you there is no mistake here," Walter Lance said definitely. "I am prepared to swear that that portrait was painted by my uncle. Of course, you remember the sensation there was at the time when the pictures were stolen. They vanished from the studio in the most mysterious fashion. Two of them were of comparative unimportance,

but yonder work my uncle reckons to be the best thing he has ever done. And I quite agree with him."

"A portrait, I suppose?" Venables asked.

"Well, my uncle always denies it. He says the face is more or less a fancy one. And while he is prepared to admit that it is coloured by recollection, he says it is not intended for anybody in particular. But I can see a likeness there."

"Of course you can, and a very strong one, too," Venables exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that your uncle cannot see that that picture is Miss Vera Rayne?"

"That is the point I have put to him more than once. He says he can't see it at all. And there are others who share the same opinion. On the other hand, there are certain friends of ours who take the same view of it as I do myself."

"And they are right," Venables said vigorously. "My word, we appear to be only on the fringe of this mystery! It occurs to me that the thief who stole that picture did not steal it for the mere sake of gain, but merely because it is *what* it is. No doubt the other two works were merely stolen as a blind. I don't wish to appear curious, my dear fellow, but what relation is Miss Rayne to Lord Ravenspur or yourself?"

"Ah, that I can't tell you," Walter replied. "Strange as it may seem, my uncle has always refused to say anything about Miss Rayne's antecedents. All I know is that she is well bred, exceedingly beautiful, and perfect in every way."

"Oh, of course," Venables said hastily. "But here is Stevens back again. It wouldn't be a bad plan to ask him point blank where that picture comes from."

Walter nodded his approval as Stevens came back into the room with a notebook in his hand. He started uneasily as Venables literally fired the question at him. But there was no time for the man to prevaricate.

"It doesn't belong to me," he said. "As a matter of fact, it is the property of a man who used to lodge with me some time ago."

"Well, it is a very fine piece of work," Venables said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "I suppose your friend is a poor man; otherwise he would not live in a place like this. Do you think he would like to sell the picture?"

Stevens replied, with obvious confusion, that he could not say. His friend was not an Englishman, and where he was to be found at that moment Stevens could not say. There appeared to be nothing more for it but to change the subject. Then, as he stood looking at the painted face, a sudden inspiration came to Walter. He wondered why he had not thought of it before. His mind went swiftly back to the moment in the studio when Lord Ravenspur had appeared so disturbed over the unexpected finding of the photograph by one of his guests. Here was the photo idealised. Could there be any connection between the thief of the picture and Lord Ravenspur's midnight guest?

"Perhaps I can stimulate your memory," he said. "Isn't your friend an Italian? Hasn't he got something to do with the variety stage? Come, you can answer my question; surely it is an easy one. Isn't your friend in London at the present moment?"

Stevens stammered and hesitated. There was something like fear in his eyes as he glanced furtively at the questioner. Lance felt quite sure that he was on the right track now.

"Now, look here," he said. "We have come on important business, and if you refuse to help us, we may find some other way of inducing you to tell the truth. On the other hand, there need be no

unpleasantness, and there is no reason why you shouldn't put a five-pound note in your pocket. Now isn't that picture the property of a man named Valdo who is at present under engagement at the Imperial Palace Theatre? Now, yes or no."

"I don't know how you found it out," Stevens said, wriggling about uncomfortably. "But it is true enough. Valdo was living with me about three years ago. He came back one night with the picture in his possession."

"Not in a frame, I suppose?" Lance asked.

"He brought it rolled up. The frame was put upon it a day or two later by Silva himself."

"Silva!" Venables exclaimed. "I thought his name was Valdo."

"That is his stage name," Stevens explained. "You see, Silva had not come to England very long. He was very poor then, and I understood that he was looking for some Englishman, who had promised him employment whenever he crossed the Channel."

"Was the Englishman ever found?" Lance asked.

"That I can't tell you," Stevens went on. "Silva is very close about his own affairs, and I believe that he belonged to some secret society. He told me the picture had been painted for him by a clever compatriot of his, who was trying to make a name for himself. Of course, it was nothing to me, and I asked no questions about it. When Silva went away to fulfil an engagement up in the North, he asked me to take care of the portrait, and it has been hanging on the wall opposite ever since. I hope there is nothing wrong about it."

"Indeed there is," Lance said significantly. "Now, if you would like to help us, we will make it worth your while. If you don't, why, it is more than possible that you may find yourself in an awkward position. I don't mind telling you that that portrait was painted by

Lord Ravenspur, and that it was stolen one night from his studio some three years ago."

Stevens gave a sudden start.

"I recollect it," he cried; "I recollect it perfectly. I remember that there was a great outcry at the time, and that a large reward was offered for the recovery of the pictures. Lord, if I had only known. And to think that all this time----"

"That reward would have been yours," Venables smiled grimly. "You would not have allowed your friendship for this man Silva----"

"Friendship!" Stevens said contemptuously. "What is friendship where money is concerned? And, after all, Silva was no real pal of mine. Precious little use he was to me."

"Oh, you'll find us useful enough if you play your cards correctly," Venables said. "We happen to know that you are on good terms with this man Valdo, or Silva, whatever you call him. In fact, we know that he gave you money tonight. You are quite astute enough to see how much better it will pay you to be on our side. Therefore, you will see the advantage of saying nothing to this Italian about our visit here tonight. Here is a five-pound note to go on with, and if I want you again, as is exceedingly probable, I will write to you and tell you where to meet me. I don't think we need detain you any more at present."

"Then you don't want to know anything about Fitzjohn Square?" Stevens asked. "I can tell you a thing or two."

"I think that will keep for the present," said Lance. "Good-night, and remember that silence is your policy."

Stevens grinned and nodded as he tucked the five-pound note into his waistcoat pocket. His recent visitors went off together in the direction of Venables' rooms.

"That was a brilliant inspiration of yours," the latter said, presently. "Now, what on earth put it into your head to ask if that man Valdo had any connection with the stolen pictures? To my mind, your question was almost an inspiration."

"Well, hardly that," Lance proceeded to explain. "But, first of all, let me tell you the events which led up to our discovery tonight. I think you ought to know. I am quite sure that the secret is safe in your hands. Now listen, carefully."

Venables listened carefully enough to Walter's extraordinary story of the strange photograph, and of the mysterious attack on Lord Ravenspur in his studio, and the subsequent discovery of the yellow handbill. In the light of these disclosures everything was perfectly plain to a mind so astute as that of Venables. He shook his head gravely.

"This looks like a vendetta," he said. "You may depend upon it that Miss Vera Rayne is the unconscious cause of all the mischief. Of course, I am treading on delicate ground now, but I suppose it is just possible that Miss Rayne may be Lord Ravenspur's daughter. We know that Ravenspur used to spend a great part of his time in Corsica, and everybody is aware of the fact that love-making out there is a dangerous business. It looks very much to me as if this man Valdo was working out a plan of revenge, either on his own behalf, or on behalf of some noble family, hailing from that picturesque corner of Europe. My theory is further strengthened by the mysterious way in which these things have come about. See how anxious your uncle is to keep everything out of the hands of the police. I feel quite sure now that the death of Louis Delahay is all part of the same drama. It wouldn't be a bad plan to mention Luigi Silva's name to your uncle, and ask him if he has ever heard of the man before."

"That is a good idea," Walter exclaimed. "I'll ask my uncle the question before I go to bed tonight."

CHAPTER XIV.

RETROSPECTION.

Most of the lights in the houses in Park Lane were out when Walter reached his uncle's residence. But as he entered the hall he could see that the studio was still ablaze. The door was closed, but a thin shaft of light penetrated from beneath. As Walter tried the door he found to his surprise that it was locked. With some feeling of apprehension he called to his uncle, and a moment later Ravenspur turned the key. His face was pale. There was in his eyes a look which spoke of some vague fear.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," Walter said.

"My dear boy, I am only too pleased to have a companion," Ravenspur said eagerly. "Upon my word, my nerves are so much shaken by these terrible happenings that I am almost afraid to be alone. Sit down and have a cigarette."

Walter took a cigarette from the silver box on a little table, nor did he fail to note the presence of a stand of spirits, which was a thing in which his uncle rarely, or never, indulged.

"I really needed a stimulant tonight," Ravenspur said, half apologetically. "Where have you been all the evening?"

"I have been out making discoveries," Walter said, as he threw himself down into a comfortable armchair, "and one of my

discoveries has been really remarkable. To be perfectly candid, Venables and myself have been doing a little private detective business together. Venables was by no means satisfied that that fellow Stevens had told all he knew at the inquest on poor Delahay, so we hunted Mr. Stevens up, and finally ran him to earth in his dingy lodgings."

"And did he give you any valuable information?" Ravenspur asked eagerly. "Was it worth your while?"

"Indeed, it was, as you will see for yourself, sir. As soon as ever we got into the room I was struck by a picture there. One does not usually find great works of art in a bed-sitting room at five shillings a week. And when you see a picture like that, worth a couple of thousand pounds at least, it naturally arouses your curiosity. And when, on the top of that, the picture is perfectly familiar to you, why, my dear uncle----"

"You mean you had seen the picture before? Where?"

"In this very studio; you painted it here, sir. It is one of the three pictures which were stolen from you some time ago. Oh, you need not shake your head, uncle. I assure you that I have not made the slightest mistake. I leave you to guess which of the three pictures it was that I saw in that dreary bed-sitting room."

"I think I can tell you," Ravenspur groaned. "It was the fancy portrait. Some instinct tells me so."

"You are quite right, sir," Walter went on. "It was the portrait, surely enough. But it did not belong to Stevens, as you will probably have guessed by this time. It had been left in his care by an Italian friend, who gave a very plausible reason for being in possession of so valuable a work. I understand that this Italian's name was Luigi Silva. Have you heard of him?"

Lord Ravenspur rose from his chair, and walked agitatedly up and down the studio. It was some little time before he spoke, and then his words came slowly and painfully.

"I see you know more than I had expected," he said. "For instance, you have formed the conclusion that this Luigi Silva stole that picture. In fact, that he came here on purpose to get possession of it, and that he took two other canvases at the same time to prevent us finding out his real motive. Till tonight I had not the remotest idea why this Luigi Silva wanted that portrait, because the loss of the other pictures utterly deceived me, as it was intended to do. Now I know better."

"But you did not answer my question, sir," Lance suggested.

"Oh, yes; you wanted to know if I was personally acquainted with this man. As a matter of fact, I am not, though I have heard far too much about him for my peace of mind. But tell me, how did you manage to ascertain the fellow's proper name?"

"That, of course, we got from Stevens," Walter explained. "Silva is in England ostensibly as a music hall artist; in other words, he is Valdo, the flying man that I told you about a little time ago. But don't you think we are getting rather from the point, uncle? I want to know the history of this man."

Once more Ravenspur commenced his walk up and down the room. He seemed to be hovering between two minds.

"Perhaps it would be wiser if I were to tell you everything," he said. "I did not intend to do so, but to a certain extent you have forced my hand, and it would be much more prudent for you to know where you stand. You asked me just now what I knew of this man Silva. Eighteen years ago he was in the employ of a great friend of mine, Count Boris Flavio. My unfortunate friend is forgotten now, but at the time of which I am speaking he enjoyed almost a European reputation. To begin with, he was an exceedingly rich man. He had

one of the most beautiful places on the Continent, situated not far from Florence. Had he been poor, Flavio would have shone in any line he chose to take up. He was a fine artist, a notable sculptor, and one or two of his books attracted great attention. In addition to this, he had few rivals as an all-round sportsman. His conversation was brilliant, his appearance and manners left nothing to be desired. Out of the scores of notable men I have met in my time, there is not one of them to whom I was so deeply attached as I was to Boris Flavio. His views, his sympathies, his extraordinary grasp of character all appealed strongly to me. So far as I know, he had no secrets from me, and it came almost as a shock one day when I had a letter from him saying that he was about to be married. Naturally one expected such a man to make a brilliant match, but, on the contrary, Flavio chose a wife from people of whom one had hardly heard. On the score of family, Carlotta Descarti had nothing with which to reproach herself. And here comes in the strange part of the affair. The Descartis and the Flavios had estates which touched one another, and between the two families there had been a feud for centuries. It was a veritable Montague and Capulet business, and I daresay it was this factor in the case that so strongly appealed to my friend Flavio. Mind you, I did not learn these facts till long after, and it so happened that circumstances prevented my attending Flavio's wedding, and I never saw his wife. Two years later I received an urgent and mysterious message from Flavio to go and see him secretly, and meet him in the grounds of his estate without letting a soul know that I was there. . . . I never saw a man so changed as my unhappy friend. It appeared that he had married a woman who was a perfect fiend. She had made more than one attempt upon his life, and he felt certain that the end was not far off. When I asked him why he tolerated such a state of things, he told me it was for the sake of his little girl, to whom he was passionately attached. And then he bound me to an extraordinary promise. Mind you, I would not have made that rash promise to any other friend, but such was the charm and magnetism of the man that I never even hesitated. And this is what I had to do. If anything happened to my friend, if he died mysteriously, I was to go to Italy at once, and, by fair means

or foul, get the child away from the baneful influence of her mother. Oh, you may look at me with astonishment, Walter, but stranger things happen every day.

"I went away fully intending to keep my promise if occasion arose, and I was not surprised to hear a few months later that poor Flavio had been found dead in his room. It was proved that he had been poisoned, and suspicion immediately fell upon his wife. On and off, the case lasted three or four years, and caused a tremendous sensation throughout Europe. Beyond all question the wife was guilty enough, but she managed to prove an extraordinary *alibi*, which so puzzled the jury that they disagreed no fewer than five times. After that the authorities recognised the futility of further proceedings, and the countess was released. What became of her I don't know, for she disappeared, and, as far as I can tell, has never been seen from that day to this. But most assuredly she would have been convicted had it not been for the devotion of a servant of hers whom she had brought from her old home with her. This servant's name was Luigi Silva. It was he who saved his mistress. I am firmly convinced it was he who engineered that marvellous *alibi*, and coached his witnesses so cleverly that there was no flaw in their evidence. I was not present at any of the trials, because I could not manage to get away, but I read enough to convince me that this Luigi Silva had talents and courage far above the common."

"And the child?" Walter asked, with pardonable curiosity.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten the main part of my story," Ravenspur proceeded. "The more I read of that case, the more convinced I was that I should be doing right in carrying out my promise to my dead friend. It was not a difficult matter. It only meant a journey to Italy and back, and the little one was in my safe custody. I leave you to guess what that child is called now."

"Vera Rayne, of course," Walter said.

"Quite so. From that day to this she has been with me always. But, mind you, I was not blind to the risk I was taking. If ever the truth came out, my life was not worth much. I knew that I should be tracked and followed, and finally lose my life, even if the search took twenty years. But, gradually, as the time wore on, I became easy in my mind. I had taken the utmost precautions to blind my trail, and the only accomplice I had was my old nurse, who has been dead for some years. Besides, Vera was growing up, and it seemed to me impossible to identify her with the baby not quite two years old. She is not in the least like her father, either, and that is why I made a mistake. I had quite forgotten that she might be very like her mother, and she I have never seen."

CHAPTER XV.

DALLAS MAKES A DISCOVERY.

"The danger would certainly lie there," Walter said thoughtfully.

"My dear boy, that is just where the danger comes in," Ravenspur replied. "I haven't the remotest idea whether Vera is like or unlike her mother, but I fear that she must be, otherwise that man Silva would never have got on my track, as I have felt quite sure lately that he has done. Doubtless in some of his wanderings he has seen the girl, he has recognised the likeness, and made up his mind that he has found the object of his search at last. You see, he has only to make a few inquiries amongst the servants, who would tell him that Vera is my ward, and that, as to the rest, she is more or less of a beautiful mystery. One can understand now why he should come to my studio and steal that portrait."

"I think I can see a better theory than that," Walter said. "Wasn't the portrait exhibited before it came back to the studio again? I seem to remember something of the kind."

"Of course it was," Ravenspur exclaimed. "I had quite forgotten that. Silva must have got his inspiration from the picture. I suppose that is why he made that murderous attack upon Sir James Seton the other night, taking him, of course, for me. But that is not the first warning I have had of the impending danger, and I am afraid it won't be the last."

Walter listened to this desponding view with impatience.

"But, surely, you are not going to take it like this, sir?" he expostulated. "By greatest good fortune we have discovered who your mysterious foe is. I think it has been a wonderful slice of luck, and we ought to take advantage of it. Surely you couldn't do any less than place the matter in the hands of the police, telling them all that has happened. At any rate, you can do nothing else. They can drive this man Silva out of the country. If I may be allowed a suggestion, you will let Inspector Dallas know without delay. If you don't care to tell him yourself, let me broach the matter. Indeed, it seems my imperative duty to do so. If you fell by the hand of this man now I should feel morally responsible for your death. And, besides, if anything happens to you, what are we going to do about Vera? She is not yet of age. She might at any moment be claimed by her mother, who you say is a perfect fiend. And, besides, though this is a minor matter, I am deeply attached to Vera myself----"

"Oh, I know, I know," Ravenspur groaned. "The thing is hedged round with troubles and difficulties. You know why I was against your marriage with Vera, and how greatly distressed I was when I found everything out. If there had been nothing in the way, nobody would have been more delighted at a match like that than myself. But you see the danger, though you little know how deep and far-reaching those Corsican vengeances are. How do I know that if you marry Vera you would not be marked down for the same fate as myself?"

"I am prepared to risk that," Walter said grimly. "Still, at the present moment, we have far more important things to talk about. And Vera must know nothing of this."

"My dear boy, of course not. I should never dream of telling her. But sooner or later she must discover everything for herself, I am afraid. I have been thinking over what you said just now, and perhaps it would be as well to let the police know."

"You will do it at once?" asked Walter eagerly.

"Well, no, I don't propose to do it at all. You have been so clever and cool-headed in this matter that I have decided to leave everything to you. The whole problem is so complicated that I am utterly unable to grasp it. I can see no connection between the two, but I am perfectly certain that the death of poor Delahay is all part of the coil."

"I feel that, too," Walter said. "But we need not concern ourselves about that at present. By the way, have you seen anything of Mrs. Delahay to-day?"

"She won't see me," Ravenspur replied. "She obstinately refuses to see anybody. She remains wilfully blind to the fact that she is in a serious position. You see, she declared in her evidence in chief that she had not been outside the hotel on the night of the murder, and yet on the testimony of three independent witnesses we have it that she was away upwards of three hours. Of course, that man Stevens is a very suspicious character, but he could have nothing to gain by swearing that he saw Mrs. Delahay with her husband very early in the morning in Fitzjohn Square. Moreover, the man's evidence was not in the least shaken. What to make of it I don't know. I wish you would try and see her. You know her far better than I do, because you were a deal in Italy before Delahay's marriage, and I think she likes you. Of course, she might have some strong reasons for leaving the hotel and for keeping the thing a secret, and she may be utterly and entirely innocent. But, really she ought to tell her best friends what is the meaning of this mystery."

Walter glanced at his watch. It still wanted some minutes to eleven o'clock, and it was no far cry to the Grand Hotel. A hansom took him there in ten minutes. Mrs. Delahay had not yet retired for the night, and Walter sent up his card, with a few urgent words pencilled on it. A maid came down presently with the information that Mrs. Delahay would see him for a moment.

She came into her sitting-room perfectly calm and self-possessed, though the deadly whiteness of her face and the scintillating of her eyes told of the torture that was going on within.

"I wish you would let me help you," Walter said as they shook hands. "I wish you would be advised by me. My uncle tells me that you refused to see him altogether."

"I was bound to," Mrs. Delahay said in a low voice. "Oh, I know exactly what you want. I am the victim of a set of extraordinary circumstances. My innocent lie may get me into serious trouble. I am not blind to that knowledge, but at the same time I cannot speak. I must allow people to think the worst. But I swear to you if it is the last word I ever utter, that I was not with my husband. I was not the woman the witness identified as the person he had seen with Louis Delahay in Fitzjohn Square that terrible morning."

The words were quietly, almost coldly, uttered, but Walter believed them as he would perhaps have refused to believe a passionate outburst on the speaker's part.

"But surely," he argued, "you can give some account of your movements. You can say why you went out and what for?"

"I cannot," Maria Delahay went on in the same even tones. "There are the most pressing reasons why I should keep silent. My dear Mr. Lance, I am grateful from the bottom of my heart for all your sympathy and kindness, but nothing can move me from my determination. After all said and done, the police can prove nothing against me. For the rest of my life I shall be a person to be shunned and avoided, but I shall know how to bear my punishment uncomplainingly. And in conclusion, I am quite convinced of this--if I told you everything, you would say that I was perfectly justified in the course I am taking. Further argument is useless."

Walter saw the futility of it, too. He saw in the woman's averted head and outstretched hand, the sign that he was no longer needed,

and that the interview was at an end. By no means satisfied he made his way down to the vestibule intent upon seeing Inspector Dallas without further delay. He was not surprised to find the object of his search engaged in discussion with the clerk.

"You are the very man I want to see," he said. "If you have ten minutes to spare, I think I can give you some useful information. I have just been having a long conversation with Lord Ravenspur, and he has asked me to lay certain facts before you."

"I can come with you now," Dallas said. "We can talk as we go along the road. Now, sir."

"It is rather a long story," Walter said. "I suppose you Scotland Yard people keep yourselves *au fait* with most of the sensational crimes which take place on the Continent? I suppose, for instance, you remember the death by poisoning of Count Boris Flavio, and how his wife was charged no fewer than five times with the crime?"

Dallas fairly started.

"That is a most extraordinary thing," he said. "I don't mind telling you that within the last day or two, or rather within the last few hours, we have blundered upon a startling light on that crime. It so happens that an Italian detective, who has come here to take a prisoner back to Rome, has interested himself in the Fitzjohn business, more or less because Mrs. Delahay is Italian herself. This detective Berti was not in court during the inquest, but he came round here an hour or two ago and expressed a casual wish to see Mrs. Delahay. He managed to do so for a moment, and then he made a statement that fairly took my breath away. But come with me as far as Scotland Yard and you shall hear him tell the story himself. I won't spoil it for him."

A little while later Walter found himself in the presence of a slim, diminutive man, with a fierce moustache and an exceedingly mild, insinuating manner.

"This is my friend Berti," Dallas explained. "And this, Berti, is Mr. Walter Lance, nephew of Lord Ravenspur. He mentioned the Flavio case to me just now with a view to getting a little information. I told him that you had had the whole business in hand, and you had better let him know that you are in a position to place your finger upon the Countess Flavio at any moment."

"Oh, that is an easy matter," Berti said. "I had the privilege of seeing the Countess this evening; but she does not call herself countess now. She is Mrs. Louis Delahay."

CHAPTER XVI.

STRONG MEASURES.

"You have made a most extraordinary mistake," Walter said. "On and off I have known Mrs. Delahay for some considerable time. I am quite certain that she is no relation whatever to Countess Flavio."

"And I, sir, am equally positive," the Italian detective replied. "I think my friend Inspector Dallas told you just now that I had the Flavio case in hand from the first. Indeed, I have had many conversations with the Countess. So positive am I that I am right that I will be prepared to make an affidavit of the facts."

"This is very strange," Lance murmured. "I cannot but believe that you have been deceived by a strong likeness between two different women. I know all about Mrs. Delahay. She comes from a very good Italian family, though I believe they were poor; they were

exceedingly proud and exclusive, and until the death of her parents, Mrs. Delahay lived a life of almost monastic seclusion."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me her name?" Berti asked. "It might facilitate matters."

"Certainly," Walter Lance replied. "Before she was married Mrs. Delahay was Signora Descarti."

A peculiar smile flitted over his face.

"That is assuredly a point in my favour," he said, "seeing that Countess Flavio also was Signora Descarti."

Lance began to feel less sure of his ground. It appeared to him that the mystery was deeper than he had anticipated, and the more he came to investigate, the more bewildering the puzzle was. Certainly he had known Maria Delahay for the last three years on and off, but when he came to think over matters it struck him for the first time with peculiar force that, really, he knew little or nothing of Maria Delahay's antecedents. He well recollected the time when Louis Delahay announced his approaching marriage. He recalled that evening perfectly. Delahay had been a self-contained sort of man, and one of the last persons in the world to associate with matrimony, but he seemed to have found his fate at length, and had quite come out of his shell, discussing his future wife with Lance.

And what was it that he had told him after all? In the first instance, Signora Descarti was no longer in the bloom of her youth. In the second place, she was shy and retiring, possibly because, up to a certain time, she had lived such a secluded life. Despite the fact that she was of excellent family, she was earning a precarious living with her brush, and Delahay had hinted that there had been a romance in her early days which had coloured her life. Really, beyond this, Walter Lance had no knowledge of this unhappy woman's past, and he did not forget that the Flavio affair was nearly twenty years old. Except by the police, the thing was absolutely forgotten. It was

almost impossible that anybody besides these authorities would recognise Carlotta, Countess Flavio, at this moment.

It came upon Lance with quite a shock that his unfortunate friend, after all, might have married a woman who had been tried five times on the capital charge. Eighteen years is a long span in a human life, and many changes can happen in that time.

Lance put aside the uneasy thoughts that rose to his mind, and turned to Berti again.

"That is distinctly a point in your favour," he said. "I confess that the fact that both ladies possessed the same maiden name comes as a shock to me. And yet, even now, I can't altogether abandon the idea that this is nothing more than a coincidence. But, tell me, what opinion did you form of Countess Flavio's character?"

The Italian smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Enigma," he said, "the woman seemed to be without feeling altogether, from the time that I arrested her until her final acquittal I never knew her display any feeling at all. Even when I had to announce to her that she was at liberty, she gave no sign of pleasure or relief. She was like a creature who had been deprived of all the emotions, like some people you see who are deeply addicted to the drug habit. I have seen her execrated by a mob of excited people, and taking no more notice of them than if she were deaf. Yes; she was a most extraordinary woman."

"Did you believe her guilty?" Lance asked.

"Ah, there you puzzle me," Berti replied. "Upon my word, I don't know. Opinion was so equally divided; in each case the jury was balanced for and against. Sometimes I thought the woman was guilty, and sometimes I thought she was innocent. Of course, it was that extraordinary *alibi* which saved her life. There was no getting away from it, for the testimony in the woman's favour was given by

people who were total strangers to her. On the other hand, all the household servants came forward one after the other, and gave their mistress a very bad name, indeed. On their testimony she would have been executed, without a doubt. If only half they said was true, the Countess Flavio was a fiend."

"Did no servant testify in her favour?" Lance asked.

"Well, one. And he was a manservant who had accompanied the Countess from her own home. According to his account, his mistress was a perfect angel, and the Count was no more nor less than a disgrace to humanity. This testimony passed for very little, seeing that Count Flavio's neighbours and tenants came forward and spoke of him as a man of singular charm and virtue."

"I have heard that," Lance said, thoughtfully. "You see, Lord Ravenspur, my uncle, was a great friend of the Count. I understand that he never met the Countess, though he had an interview with the Count not long before his death. According to what Lord Ravenspur says, at that time the Count walked in fear of his life. He was very fearful lest his wife should try to destroy him. And now you tell me that the Countess Flavio was no less than the wife of my friend Delahay. I don't know what to think about it. I presume that Inspector Dallas will take steps to assure himself that Mrs. Delahay is the woman you take her to be."

"Well, yes," Dallas said grimly; "I don't see how the matter can rest here. We know perfectly well that Mrs. Delahay was away from her hotel for upwards of two hours on the night of her husband's death. It has been proved that she was seen in his company. And yet, at the first outset, she declares that she has not been outside her bedroom. One doesn't like to come to conclusions; they are fatal things to form in our profession. But it seems to me pretty obvious that there is one person who could clear up this mystery, and she happens to be the dead man's wife."

Lance had nothing to say in objection to this. Still, at the same time, there was a haunting doubt in the back of his mind that circumstances were shaping themselves against Maria Delahay apart from any faults of her own.

"You haven't enough to justify an immediate arrest, I suppose?" he asked. "You see what I mean?"

"Oh, I see perfectly well what you mean, sir," Inspector Dallas replied. "There is nothing to gain by such a course. It is impossible for the woman to get away. Indeed, we should take immediate steps to prevent her leaving the country. If she is the guilty party, she will be much more use to us as a free woman than she would be as a suspected criminal under lock and key. But, unless I am mistaken, Mr. Lance, you came here to tell me something."

"I had clean forgotten all about it," Lance exclaimed. "But as it is getting late now, if you don't mind I will leave it till the morning. It is a long story."

A few moments later and Lance was retracing his steps in the direction of the Grand Hotel. He was going to do wrong; he was going to do something which, sooner or later, might land him in serious trouble, but that did not deter him for a moment. In the hall of the hotel he scribbled a hasty note, and sent it up to Mrs. Delahay. A message came down in a moment or two to say that Mrs. Delahay would be pleased to see Mr. Lance.

He found her waiting in the sitting-room, just as cold and pale and impassive as before.

"You have something very important?" she asked.

"Indeed, I have," Lance exclaimed. "I want you to believe that I am actuated entirely by the friendliest motives, and if I speak plainly you will understand that I am not wanting in feeling. I have been with Inspector Dallas tonight and he introduced me to an Italian detective

whose name is Berti. The latter assures me that his name is quite familiar to you."

"He is quite mistaken," Mrs. Delahay said in her cold, even voice. "I don't know anybody of that name. As to a policeman, I never had the honour of speaking to one in my life."

"You are quite certain of that?"

"Absolutely. If it were true, what should I have to gain by denying it? If you have anything to say to me, it will be far better to speak quite plainly."

The woman spoke quietly enough. It was impossible to believe that she was wilfully deceiving her questioner.

"Very well, then," Lance said, "I may as well tell you that this man Berti was the detective who had the Flavio case in hand. You will remember, of course, what an extraordinary sensation that drama caused in Italy many years ago."

"Did it?" Mrs. Delahay said indifferently. "I never had the slightest interest in that kind of thing. So far as this particular case is concerned, I never heard of it before."

Lance could only stare in astonishment. She was speaking and acting now just as, according to Berti, the Countess Flavio had behaved before and during the trial. Was she the sport of circumstance, or was she the woman she denied herself to be?

CHAPTER XVII.

LOOKING BACKWARDS.

"That is very strange," Lance murmured. "I am told that the trial in question was the talk of Europe for two or three years. I believe the papers were full of it at the time. And yet you don't seem to have heard of it. Isn't the name of Flavio familiar to you at all? It is not a common name."

As Lance spoke he saw a swift and subtle change pass over the face of his companion. A flame of colour stained either cheek; then it was gone, leaving her still more ghastly white than before.

"I have not told you quite the truth," the woman said; "but in twenty years one forgets even the keenest of sorrows. Now I come to think of it, the name of Flavio reminds me of one of the most unhappy experiences in my existence. There was a certain Count Flavio whose estates joined those of my father. For some generations there had been a deep and bitter feud existing between the Flavios and the Descartis. The head of the Flavios was a very old man, who had two sons. Not to make a long story of it, the young people met, and fell in love with each other: the young people on one side being my sister and myself. The intrigue was found out, of course, and for the next ten years I was practically a prisoner in my father's house. He had a gloomy old fortress somewhere up country, and there I was detained. I might have been there still had my parents lived."

"And your sister?" Lance asked. "What of her?"

Again the woman hesitated. Again the look of pain and suffering swept like a wave across her face.

"They told me my sister was dead," she murmured. "I had to take their word for it."

"And you believed it? You believe it still? I hope you will pardon me for my persistent questions, but it is quite necessary that I should put them. Do you feel quite convinced?"

Once more Mrs. Delahay hesitated. Once more she seemed to shrink as if in physical pain.

"How can I know? How can I tell?" she asked. "Did I not say that I had been a prisoner all those years? This would account for the fact that I know nothing about that Flavio tragedy. Are you going to tell me that it is one and the same family to whom my sister and myself were attached?"

"Indeed, I do," Lance went on. "Your Count Flavio had two sons. When he died his elder son came into the title and estates. That was the man who was afterwards poisoned by his wife; at least, a great many people think so. And his wife's name was Carlotta. Her surname was Descarti. My dear Mrs. Delahay, it is impossible to believe that this is a coincidence."

"I quite agree with you," Mrs. Delahay said, in a low voice. "They seem to have deceived me about my sister, and my parents told me that she was dead. I suppose they meant that she was dead to the family. She must have made her escape, and married her lover after all. I was less fortunate. But what you say absolutely overwhelms me. The man that my sister loved was a splendid specimen of humanity; he was kind-hearted and generous; in every sense of the word he was a gentleman. And I can vouch for my sister's many good qualities. To say that she poisoned him is absurd. Why, she simply worshipped him. But, tell me, what opinion did the world form as to the merits of this extraordinary case?"

"I want to spare you as much pain as possible," Lance murmured. "But your sister was held up to execration as a fiend in human form. One servant after another gave evidence to this effect. They seemed to think that your sister was not altogether sane--but why should I

torture you with these details? What I really came here to tell you is this. The Italian detective, Berti, who had the case in hand, is in England at the present moment, and he has seen you. He declares that you are Countess Flavio. You can see how seriously this accusation may tell against you--later on."

Lance uttered the last two words reluctantly enough, but Mrs. Delahay saw their full significance.

"Oh, I know what you mean," she said. "You mean that I have placed myself in a perilous position. But there is one thing I can assure you--I am not the Countess Flavio. If necessary, when the time comes, I can prove this in a manner which would set even that Italian policeman's suspicions at rest. It is very kind of you to take all this trouble on my behalf. I suppose you want me to tell the whole truth, and say why I denied being away from the hotel the other night, when three people can come forward and show that my statement is false. Well, it was false. I don't mind going as far as that. But more I cannot and will not say, except that I am an innocent woman who has been a prey to cruel misfortune all her life."

There was determination as well as sadness in the words. Lance could see that he was merely wasting his time.

"Think it well over," he said; "give it every consideration. I will call and see you again in the morning."

No reply came from Maria Delahay. She merely held out her hand, and Lance took his leave without another word. Then the woman dropped into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

Why did Fate persecute her in this way, she asked herself. Why had her life been such a misery for the past twenty years. Surely all this was a terrible price to pay for a childish indiscretion. And yet, though the years had been long and burdensome, it seemed but a brief step back to the happy, sunny days when she and her sister had been

children playing in the woods at home and getting every drop of enjoyment out of life. Then they had hardly comprehended the feud that existed between the Descartis and the Flavios. Indeed, they had looked upon it as rather a silly business altogether and a distinct nuisance to mutual friends and neighbours. They had begun to notice, too, that the sons of old Flavio were good to look upon, and finally one day a slight adventure in the woods had thrown the young people together.

The thing had begun in a harmless fashion enough. They met again, and yet once more. They fell in the way of discussing the family quarrel and making light of it. From then on the path was pleasant and easy enough, and one day the two girls awoke to the fact that they were both deeply in love with the sons of their hereditary enemy. It was at this point that stern old Descarti discovered the great secret.

What happened after that Maria Descarti hardly knew. There was a terrible storm of rage and passion, sleepless nights, and tear-bedewed pillows, and then such a life of greyness and despair that the girls had never dreamt of. When at length she ventured courage to ask after her sister, she was told that the latter was dead. She took this statement literally, and she resigned herself to the inevitable.

The prison doors were open at length, but only on the death of her parent, and there she was at forty years of age, helpless and friendless, with no knowledge of the world, and nothing to aid her besides her brush and pencil. The struggle was indeed a hard one, and it looked like ending at length when she came in contact with Louis Delahay. She had no strong passion to give him, nothing but the tranquil affection of approaching middle age.

She had been perfectly candid in the matter, and Delahay knew exactly what he had to expect. Perhaps the prospect of tranquil

happiness was far better than the rosy dreams of youth. And all this was now shattered by the unexpected tragedy.

Maria Delahay had reached this point in her thoughts; then her mind wandered on to what Lance had recently told her. And so, after all, her sister was alive. This knowledge had not reached Maria Delahay tonight. She had suspected it for some days, and it had come about in quite a prosaic way.

She could see it now quite clearly in her mind. The pleasant-mannered chambermaid had come into the sitting-room soon after Delahay had gone out on that fatal evening. She had evidently taken a liking to her visitor. Maria could see her now as she fussed about the room.

"Is there anything you want?" she asked.

"You seem to have forgotten me," the girl said. "I waited upon you when you were here last spring."

"Last spring!" Mrs. Delahay exclaimed. "Why, surely, you have made a mistake. I have never been here before."

"Oh, madam," the girl said reproachfully, "you are making fun of me. You came here by yourself, and stayed for the best part of a week. You had very few visitors, and you used to talk to me a good deal. . . . Only the name is different. You used to have Carlotta, not Maria, on the envelopes I brought up to you."

Mrs. Delahay started. With difficulty she restrained her feelings, for the chambermaid's innocent words had let a flood of light in a dark place. In the happy old days people were constantly mistaking her for her sister. Was it possible that her sister was still alive? Was it possible that she had been deceived all this time? A little dissimulation might be the means of getting the truth from the voluble chambermaid.

"You have sharp eyes," she said, "and, no doubt, a good memory. How long did I stay here, and where did I go afterwards?"

"It was a little over a week," the girl said. "And then you went away to Number Seventeen, Isleworth Road, Kensington. I remember the address because I have a sister in service who used to live next door. Perhaps madam does not want to be remembered? There are many reasons why it is prudent not to know too much."

"I am glad to see you are so discreet," Mrs. Delahay smiled. "There is no reason to mention this to anybody else, you understand?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER MANY YEARS.

Left alone to herself, Maria Delahay had summed up the situation clearly and logically. Beyond all doubt her sister was still alive. Beyond all doubt Carlotta had been staying at the Grand Hotel within the past twelve months. She, too, seemed to have had her misfortunes, misfortunes more keen and cruel than even those of her younger sister. It was very strange that Maria should learn the truth in this fashion. It was stranger still that she should discover the house to which Carlotta had gone on leaving the hotel. Up to this moment Maria had no idea of going out herself. She intended to go straight to bed and await her husband's return.

Now a strange restlessness came over her. She felt it impossible to remain imprisoned within those four walls. There was no likelihood

of Louis Delahay's return for the next two hours. Why, then, should she not go out and take a cab as far as Isleworth Road? It was very late, of course, but then London was a late place, and a midnight call no novelty.

Allowing herself to act on the impulse of the moment, Maria walked downstairs, and out into the Strand. Hailing a cab, she was driven to Isleworth Road, where she gave orders for the driver to stop. The locality was a respectable one, and there were lights in a good many of the houses; but at number seventeen Mrs. Delahay met with disappointment. The house was not empty, though the blinds were down, and there was not a light to be seen. The dingy nature of the steps and the tarnished look of the brasswork testified to the fact that neither had received any attention of late. As Maria stood there ringing the bell for the third time, in the faint hope of making somebody hear, a policeman came along.

"You are wasting your time there, lady," he said civilly enough. "The people are not at home. I think they are coming back at the end of the week, because my instructions to keep a special eye on the house don't go beyond Saturday."

Maria thanked the officer and went back in a cab. She would have liked to have asked more questions, but she restrained her natural curiosity. After all, it was not a far cry to Saturday, and even then she might meet with a disappointment. In all probability her sister had left London long ago.

Maria was thinking all these things over now that Walter Lance had gone. She wondered that her sister had so completely passed out of her mind. But, then, she had had so many terrible anxieties to weigh her down. She could not sleep for thinking of the tragedy. She paced up and down the room in a vain attempt to get away from herself. The clocks outside were striking the hour of midnight, but the roar of the Strand was going on still as if it were high noon. A sudden

resolve came to the woman. She would go out at once and try her luck at Isleworth Road again.

She took no cab this time. She knew the way. As she walked along she was conscious of the fact that she was being followed. She smiled bitterly to herself. What had those people to be afraid of? Did they think she was going to run away?

Her heart gave a great leap as she saw the lights gleaming behind the drawn blinds at No. 17. She had only to ring once, then the door was promptly opened by a typical English servant, who waited for the visitor to speak.

"I think there is a lady here I want to see," Maria stammered. "At least she was here for some time in the spring. You see, she is my sister, and we have not met for twenty years. It may appear strange, but I don't even know her name."

It seemed to Maria that this was a proper precaution on her part. Though her explanation sounded weak enough, to her great relief she saw the servant smile and open the door a little wider.

"That is all right, madam," the servant said. "I can see that you are my mistress's sister by the likeness. Will you please come this way."

The next five minutes seemed like an hour to Maria. Then the door opened, and a tall, dark woman came in. The two looked at one another for quite a minute in absolute silence. It was so strange to meet after all these years, so sad for both to see how the other had altered. Then Maria Delahay moved forward, and the two women kissed each other almost coldly.

"Why did you come here?" the Countess said. "How did you manage to find me out? I thought you were dead."

"I thought you were dead, too, till the other night," Maria said. "I was told that twenty years ago. I should not be here at all but for an

amazing chance. You will remember that you were staying at the Grand Hotel some time in the spring, and it so happens that my rooms are on the same floor as yours, and that the same chambermaid is still there. When she welcomed me as an old customer I guessed by instinct that you were still alive. And if you only knew it, there is a providence behind this thing."

Countess Flavio appeared to be listening in a dull, mechanical kind of way. There was no disguising the fact that she was both distressed and disconcerted to find herself face to face with her long-lost sister again. "You know nothing of my history?" she asked. "Not till tonight," Maria said. "I have recently been listening to it. I knew nothing. How could I know anything? When our dream of happiness came so suddenly to an end I became practically a prisoner in that dreadful old house of ours near Naples. I was told that you were dead, and I believed the story. I knew nothing of your existence till a day or two ago. I was utterly ignorant of the fact that you had had such a dreadful time. Not that I would believe anything they say, Carlotta, because I know what you were in the old days. But however dreadful your experiences have been, you, at any rate, snatched a brief happiness. You married the man of your choice. How did you manage to escape?"

"Oh, don't ask me," Carlotta Flavio said bitterly. "If you only knew everything you would see that you were far better off in your prison than I was with my liberty. Do you know that I was five times tried for my life? Do you know that for four years I was the most execrated woman in South Italy? But I am not going into that now. I want to know what brings you here this evening. Why you should come at such an inconvenient time?"

"But why inconvenient?" Mrs. Delahay protested. "We were fond of one another in the old times. And what more natural than I should seek out my sister at the first opportunity? But you are changed. Doubtless your misfortunes have soured you. I have had my misfortunes, too. Of course you have heard lately a good deal about

Mr. Louis Delahay--I mean the unfortunate artist who was found murdered in his studio the other night?"

Countess Flavio started. Her lips grew white.

"Who has not heard of it?" she said. "The papers are full of the tragedy. People are talking about nothing else. But you are not going to tell me that there is any connection----"

"Indeed, I am," Maria went on. "As I said just now, for years I was no better than a prisoner. I should be a prisoner still if our parents had lived. Then, finally, when I found my freedom, I made a discovery that there was absolutely no money left. I was forced to get my own living. I had nothing beyond my brush, and things were going from bad to worse with me when I made the acquaintance of Louis Delahay. We always liked one another from the first, and when he asked me to marry him I gladly consented. It seemed to me that the way was opening up for a happy middle-age. It seemed to me that Fate had got tired of persecuting me at last. I married Louis Delahay and we came back to England."

"You married Delahay?" the Countess said mechanically, "and you came back to England? I am trying to realise it. I read the account of the inquest. I know that people are saying that Delahay's wife is responsible for his death; but I did not dream then that it was my own sister whom folks were condemning. I cannot believe it now. But why did you go out that evening. If you had remained in your room nobody would have been----"

"I left the hotel to come here," Maria replied. "But I found that you were not in London. And now I am going to tell you why it is that I have refused to speak, why it is that I have allowed people to regard me as a perjurer. You say you read the account of the inquest. Do you recollect what a poor creature called Stevens said? He swore, and, what is more, he believed every word he said, that he saw Louis and myself together in Fitzjohn Square early on that fatal

morning. Come, if you read the paper carefully, you must have seen that. It was the most sensational piece of evidence given at the inquest. The man picked me out in court, and said positively that he had seen me with Louis. But he didn't, as you know perfectly well."

"As I know perfectly well?" the Countess stammered. "What have I got to do with it? Where do I come in?"

Maria Delahay threw up her hands with an impatient gesture. There was a steady gleam in her eyes now. She had lost all her listless manner.

"I was not there," she said, "because I was somewhere else. That James Stevens saw someone with my husband on that morning is absolutely certain. It is absolutely certain, too, that he did not see me. Then who did he see whose likeness to me is so great as to deceive a pair of keen eyes under a brilliant electric light? It was you, *you*, Carlotta, who were walking with my husband at that hour in the morning. Now tell me what it all means."

CHAPTER XIX.

CARLOTTA'S STORY.

"On, this is terrible," the Countess stammered.

"Of course it is," Maria Delahay cried. "Why don't you be candid with me? I have told you what my name is, and, besides, you already knew. When you saw my husband on that fatal night your likeness

to me would have struck him at once, and explanations would have followed. Then why are you trying to deceive me now?"

"I hardly know what I am saying," the Countess replied. "The whole thing is such a terrible complication. I don't want to deceive you, Maria, and I will tell you all I can. You might believe me or not, but when I read of the death of Louis Delahay, for the moment I had quite forgotten you. You see it was a great shock to me when you came in just now, especially as I had not seen you for so many years. But I am getting muddled up again. I am beginning to wonder which of us is which. It seems to me that all this miserable business is merely the result of the strong likeness which exists between us."

"Never mind that," Mrs. Delahay cried. "If you will remember, in my evidence I said my husband had gone out, that he did not return all night, and that I found him dead in Fitzjohn Square in the morning. I was out of the hotel for nearly two hours trying to find you, after I had been so strangely put on your track by the chambermaid. Perhaps it was a foolish thing on my part to conceal my absence, but, of course, I never guessed the result of my folly. It never occurred to me till afterwards that my absence from the hotel could be so easily proved. Even that did not matter so much. And when the witness Stevens swore that he saw me with my husband at a time when I had said I was in my hotel, things began to look serious for me. I know perfectly well that I may be arrested at any moment on a charge of murdering my husband. How true that charge will be I leave you to judge for yourself. But the mystery was no longer a mystery to me when Stevens told the court most positively that he had seen me with my husband. I did not know that Louis was acquainted with you. He never mentioned your name, but directly Stevens had finished I knew that it must have been you who was with my husband; and now I must ask you to give me an explanation."

"That is an easier matter than it seems," Countess Flavio said. "I knew Louis Delahay, though he had no acquaintance with me."

"That sounds impossible," Maria murmured.

"Oh, I know it does, but it is true all the same; and to make my story plain I shall have to go back nearly eighteen years. The events which led to my making Louis Delahay's acquaintance took place near Florence at the time I mentioned."

"That is strange," Mrs. Delahay murmured. "I was in Florence about then, too. Yes, I know I told you that I was practically a prisoner all those years, but there were times when I had a certain latitude. I was very ill about that time, and the doctor ordered me to Florence, saying that it was good for me to see people and mix with crowds. I was supposed to be there by myself, but there was no movement of mine which was not noted. I never took even the shortest walk without being dogged and spied upon. The people who called themselves my servants were, in reality, my gaolers. But why do I worry you with these trivial details when there is so much of importance to say? Go on with your story."

"Well, as I was saying," the Countess explained, "I was in Florence with my husband. We had been married then something like three years. We had rather a lonely villa on the outskirts of the town. Ours was not a happy life; indeed, it was most miserable. I daresay there were faults on my side, too; but one night we had a violent quarrel, and, on the spur of the moment, I made up my mind to run away. I managed to get all my jewels together. I managed to leave the house in darkness and steal through the grounds to the road. I was dressed all in black, and I remember the night was very thick. Just as I was congratulating myself on my escape my husband overtook me. He was beside himself with passion. He laid violent hands upon me. I believe he would have killed me if I had not managed to wrench myself free and make for the road. What we said I do not know, but I suppose our voices must have carried far, for I had only got a little down the road, with my husband in hot pursuit behind me, when a man emerged from the cottage and caught me by the

arm. At first I thought he was one of my husband's tools, but the first words that he said reassured me."

"Do not be afraid,' he whispered. 'I was trespassing on the Count's property just now, and I heard all that was said. That man is dangerous, and it is necessary that I should protect you for the present. Come in here with me.'"

"He did not wait for me to consent. He fairly lifted me from the ground into the blackness and seclusion of the cottage. It was all done in less time than it takes to tell. A moment later I heard my husband go raging down the road, and then I knew that my life was saved. Mind you, it was altogether too dark to see my rescuer. It would have been imprudent to strike a light. I stayed for some little time until I regained my composure, after which I made up my mind to return home again. It would never do for people to think that a Descarti was a coward, and, besides, there were other considerations. I would go back home again and give my husband one more chance, especially as I had a friend in the house in the person of Luigi Silva, who had followed me on my marriage. At the same time, I did not forget the dictates of prudence. It might be still necessary for me to seek an asylum, and my instinct told me that I could trust the man by my side. On the spur of the moment I implored him to take care of my jewels for me. He demurred for a time on the score that he was a perfect stranger to me, then, finally, he consented, at the same time taking from his pocket a card, which he said contained his name and address. And thus the strange interview ended, thus we parted, never to meet again till that fatal night we came together in Fitzjohn Square. I know the story sounds incredible."

"Not to me," said Mrs. Delahay, sadly. "Nothing could be incredible to a woman who has gone through what I have. But go on. You went back home again, after entrusting your jewelry to a perfect stranger whose face you had never seen."

"Indeed, I did. And we should never have known one another even if we had met. I went back to the villa, and afterwards we returned to our estate. But it was not for long. A month or two later my husband was found dead in bed, and it was proved beyond question that he had been poisoned. Then began a time for me--a time of terror and anxiety so great that I sometimes marvelled that I retained my reason. For four years the torture lasted, and then, at length, I was free. I was in so strange and morbid a condition that the sight of a human face was hateful to me. I wanted to go off and live on some distant island until I recovered my nerve and strength again. I succeeded at length in finding the place I needed, and for twelve or thirteen years I led a life of absolute seclusion in a little cottage high up the Italian Alps. I had taken a certain amount of money with me, but I woke up to the fact one day that my means were exhausted. You must know that I fled straight away, as soon as the last trial was finished, and that all those years I never saw a single face that was familiar to me. But by the end of that period I was quite myself again. I felt a strange longing to go into the world and see what life was like once more. Besides, there was my child to consider."

"Your child?" Mrs. Delahay cried. "This is the first time you have mentioned a child. Do you mean to say that you could part with your own flesh and blood in that callous way?"

The Countess' expression hardened for a moment.

"She was his child as well as mine," she whispered.

"Well, what of that? I fail to see that it makes any difference. Your husband might have been a passionate man, but, apart from that, everybody spoke exceedingly well of him. He was immensely popular. He was clever and generous. He had hosts of friends--I know that through an English nobleman, who was greatly attached to the Count. Everybody spoke well of him."

"Oh, I know, I know," the Countess said, with a bitter smile. "The catalogue of his virtues was trumpeted high enough at the trial, and I was no more than an inhuman wretch, not fit to live, certainly not fit to have a husband like Count Boris Flavio. But you shall hear my story presently. You shall hear what my witness has to say. At any rate, I hated my husband with a deep and abiding hate, so that I could not bear to look upon the face of his child. You may say that all this is unnatural and inhuman, but you little know what I had to put up with. Still, twelve or fourteen years will heal most wounds, and when I came back into the world I was possessed with a longing to see my daughter. I did not like to go back to the old place again, so I sent to make inquiries. Imagine my feelings when I heard that my daughter, Vera, had been kidnapped during the time of the first trial, and that she had never been seen again. That is two years ago now. I managed to communicate with Luigi Silva, and he was just as astonished and surprised as I was. Naturally, he thought that I had made arrangements with Vera, and that she was with me all the time. One of my reasons for coming to England was to try and find my child. My other reason was to see Mr. Louis Delahay and get my jewels back from him. This was quite imperative, as I am at my wits' end for money."

CHAPTER XX.

VALDO IN A NEW LIGHT.

"How did you know my husband was in England?" Maria asked.

"I didn't," the Countess confessed. "I looked for him all over the Continent. I should have written to him, only I had mislaid his card, which I found at length after a long search. Seeing that the address was Fitzjohn Square, I thought I would come and interview Mr. Delahay. It was quite late at night that I found that he was staying at the Grand Hotel, and as things were very pressing indeed, I sent him an express letter asking for an interview early in the morning. In response I received a telegram saying that he would see me at once, and if I could manage to be at the corner of Fitzjohn Square at one o'clock in the morning. I told you just now that things were very urgent, because I had taken this house furnished, and I had already had one or two unpleasant interviews with the landlord, who naturally wanted his money. The telegram seemed to be reasonable enough. Artists are very late people, and, besides, it occurred to me that Mr. Delahay had probably had those jewels in his house. At any rate, I met him. You can imagine how astonished he was when he saw my face. Of course, he naturally concluded that I was your sister, but he seemed to think that you had told him that I was dead. I suppose that was so."

"Certainly it was," Mrs. Delahay said. "I was definitely told that you were dead. And when I related our unhappy story to my husband, I always spoke of you as one who was no more."

"Yes; I quite see. Well, we went along very pleasantly together to the house, and it seemed to me that all I had to do was to get those jewels and come and call upon you. Naturally, I had not heard of you for years. Indeed, I regarded you as dead, much the same as you were under the impression that I no longer lived. But when we reached the studio, a light was burning there, and, looking in, I saw a man painting, a handsome man whom your husband told me was Lord Ravenspur. You can imagine that neither of us wanted to be seen. There was no occasion to raise any doubts in the intruder's mind, and so we waited till he was gone. Then my case of jewels was handed over to me, and I came straight back here. Not till late the next afternoon did I know what had happened."

"Then there is nothing more you can tell me?" Mrs. Delahay asked.

"I am sorry to say there is not. But since you have been here certain suspicions have begun to grow in my mind which fill me with dread. It would not be fair to utter them yet, until I am more certain of my facts. Still, I am glad you have come now, because I think you will be of assistance to me. You heard me speak just now of Luigi Silva, but, of course, you will remember him perfectly well?"

"I recollect him," Mrs. Delahay said. "A queer-tempered man, with strange and wayward moods, but he was sincerely attached to us. I should like to see him again."

"You *shall* see him," the Countess said. "And if you have half an hour to spare it shall be this very night. When I discovered that my daughter had been stolen I got in touch with Silva, who, as I told you just now, was under the impression that I had taken Vera away and placed her in safe custody, lest the authorities should interfere and remove her from my influence. When he found that I had barely given Vera a thought all these years, he was furiously angry with me. Indeed, his rage knew no bounds. He had always been so faithful; he had always worked so hard for me, that I was astounded. He refused to have any more to do with me. He went off

without leaving his address, and for some little time I have been searching for him in vain. Quite by accident I found him the other night. He seems to have turned his athletic powers to advantage, for he is performing in London now as a kind of flying man. I have seen the performance, and it is exceedingly clever. But that isn't what I want to talk to you about. I know where Silva, or Valdo, as he now calls himself, is to be met with. Within a few moments I want you to come along and add your persuasion to mine."

"I will do anything you like," Mrs. Delahay said; "anything to get to the bottom of this singular mystery."

The Countess started up at once, and proceeded to don her hat and cloak. Then she led the way to the back of the house.

"There is a way out here," she said, "which leads into a lane. Now, come along. We have not very far to go."

They turned out of the lane presently into a quiet, secluded thoroughfare, where the Countess stopped. They had not long to wait, for presently two figures came down the road, talking earnestly together. The light was not good, but it was quite sufficient to show Mrs. Delahay that one of the men was James Stevens.

"The witness, Stevens," she whispered. "He must not see us together. There are many reasons why it is inadvisable that he should learn the truth. The other man looks like Silva; only it is difficult to be sure after all these years. Let me stand in this doorway till you have managed to get rid of Stevens."

The Countess nodded her approval, and Maria Delahay slipped into the shadow of the door. From where she stood it was quite possible to see what was going on. She saw her sister approach the two men. She did not fail to note Stevens start as he recognised, or thought he recognised, the woman who was known to him as Maria Delahay. On the still air she could catch a word or two.

"Very well," she heard Silva say sullenly. "I have one or two things to say to my friend here, and then I'll come back to you."

The two men came past where the woman was standing in the doorway. They were conversing in deep whispers, so that the listener could catch only a word or two, yet those words filled her with vague apprehension. She caught the name of Ravenspur as it came hissing from Silva's lips. Then there was something she could not follow, and, finally, clearly enunciated the one word "tonight." A moment later and Stevens was shuffling off down the street, while Silva returned to Countess Flavio. As Mrs. Delahay joined them, the little Italian glanced from one to the other.

"So you are both here," he said.

There was something in the insolence of his manner that moved Mrs. Delahay to anger.

"I should hardly have known you," she said; "certainly I should not have known you from the tone in which you are addressing us. Have you quite forgotten what you owe to your late master's children?"

"I have forgotten nothing," Silva said. "Why do you come here persecuting me like this? Why cannot you let me alone? But for me your sister would have been in a dishonoured grave by now. I saved her life. I saved the good name of the family. And how am I repaid? What does she care so long as she saves herself. And yet I remember her a sweet and innocent child, just as I remember her own little one. Ah, I was fond of her, and she was fond of me. I could never have gone off and hidden myself, and left little Vera to the tender mercies of the world. I, a man, no relation, couldn't have done that. But that her mother could have done such a thing--ah, it seems unnatural, unwomanly."

"You will find her for me?" the Countess said timidly.

"I have found her," Silva whispered fiercely. "But whether I have found her for you or not is quite another matter. I was your good friend once. I was your devoted slave and servant. I would have laid down my life for you both, and you know it. But all that I felt for you was as nothing compared to my love for your little one. And when you told me that you had left her without another thought, my blood fairly boiled with passion. I thought you had taken her with you. I fondly imagined that you were devoting the rest of your life to her welfare and happiness. And then, one day, you come coolly to me and ask me where you can find your child. You go your own way, and leave me to go mine. I suppose you have found out that I come this way home, and so have waylaid me. But you will never get me to raise a finger on your behalf again. Still, it does not much matter. I know where the child is. I shall know how to act when the time comes. My vengeance is ready, when I care to stretch out my hand to take it."

The words poured from the speaker's lips in a torrent of passionate vehemence. He fairly quivered with rage. He seemed to be beside himself with anger. There was something almost akin to madness in his eyes.

"Oh, calm yourself," the Countess said. "My good Silva, I make every allowance for your feelings, but you are going altogether too far. You, above all men, ought to know how I longed to get away from anything that reminded me of my husband. Don't forget that she was his child as well as mine, and that she had her father's eyes and charm of expression. Besides, I was barely responsible for my actions then. Consider what I had had to go through. Consider my mental torture and degradation. And yet you say it was my duty day by day to watch my child and see the hateful pleasantness of her father's smile looking at me from behind her innocent features. Oh, I couldn't do it. I tried to persuade myself that it was my duty, but all to no avail. I was in such a state of nervous exhaustion then, so near the borderland of insanity, that I believe I should have taken the life of the child if she had gone with me. And, naturally, I

thought that she was with friends. I knew that you would see that she was all right. And, in addition to all this, she was her father's heiress."

"But who was interested in taking her away?" Mrs. Delahay asked. "I don't see how anybody could gain anything by saddling themselves with a child like that."

CHAPTER XXI.

TO BE IN TIME.

"It is plain enough to me," Silva growled; "but then I am acquainted with the facts of which you two know nothing. With all his faults, Count Flavio was passionately attached to his little girl. Through her he could see a means of stabbing his wife to the heart, and he was never the man to hesitate where a piece of refined cruelty was concerned. He arranged that kidnapping himself."

"Incredible," Mrs. Delahay cried. "And why?"

"Have I not just told you so?" Silva went on. "You remember Count Flavio and his brother twenty years ago? You recollect what a handsome man he was? No one was more popular or sought after. No one was more pleasing and fascinating. But behind that fair exterior was the nature and disposition of a devil. Oh, I knew it before that unhappy marriage took place. And that was why I insisted upon accompanying Signora Carlotta when she fled with the count. It was not long before she found him out. It was not long

before he began to employ the petty tyrannies which poisoned her life and made existence almost unendurable. I have stood behind his chair when guests have been present. I have seen his clever simulation of affection, whilst all the time he was saying things that wound sensitive women and drive them to despair. Many a time I have been tempted to thrust a knife between his shoulders. More than once I have had my hand upon a blade. But if I stayed here all night I could not sum up the catalogue of that man's diabolical cruelties. And when at length he paid the penalty of his crime, I stood by my mistress, and saved her from a felon's grave. It was hard work, for everything was so cunningly laid that my mistress stood convicted from the very first. Perhaps Count Boris reckoned upon an untimely end. At any rate, all his servants, and the greater part of his tenantry, followed one another in the witness-box and gave him the character of a saint, whilst his wife was painted in the blackest colours. But for a little scheme of mine, she would have been convicted beyond the shadow of a doubt. Still, we are getting away from the point. I was going to prove to you how I knew that the Count had arranged for his daughter to be kidnapped before his death. Some time previous to his marriage one of his greatest friends was an English nobleman, called Lord Ravenspur. Quite by accident, a few months before the tragedy, I saw a letter which the Count had written to Lord Ravenspur imploring the latter to give him a secret interview at once. In that letter the most horrible charges were levelled against the Countess. But we need not go into those now. I managed to get hold of the reply to the letter, and I had no scruples in reading it. Mind you, I did not think then that there was a plot on foot to kidnap the child, and I was prevented from attending the interview owing to the cunning of the Count, and within a few weeks afterwards I had plenty of things to occupy my attention, so that those letters were forgotten. And so things went on for years, until I heard from the Countess again, and I found that she knew nothing of her child. Oh, I have made no secret of my feelings in that matter. I have spoken quite freely tonight."

Silva paused for a moment, and wiped his heated face.

"From that time forward," he went on, "I have devoted myself almost exclusively to my search for the child. It did not occur to me till comparatively recently that Lord Ravenspur had had anything to do with it. In fact, that nobleman's name had quite gone out of my mind. I heard him spoken of from time to time as a great artist. I am fond of pictures myself, and about three years ago I went into a private view in Bond Street, and there I saw a face which attracted my attention. It was the head of a young girl precisely what little Vera would have been by that time. The more I studied those features, the more convinced was I that here was the object of my search. And when I asked the name of the artist, I was told that it was none other than Lord Ravenspur.

"Then it came upon me like a flash that my search was at an end. The recollection of those letters came to me; then I knew as plainly as possible that, at the instigation of the Count, Lord Ravenspur had taken the child away. Those two were in league together. But the one who still lives shall not escape his punishment. I will see to that."

"But are you quite sure?" the countess asked eagerly. "Have you seen Vera? Does she live with Lord Ravenspur?"

"That I don't quite know," Silva said. "I have hung about the house; I was determined to find out things for myself without raising suspicions in the minds of the servants. I gradually discovered what the household consisted of. On and off for the last two years I have watched and waited, but I saw no sign of anybody resembling the girl of whom I was in search. And gradually I began to think that I had made a mistake. Business took me away to the North for some months, and when I came back again I put in a day or two more in Park Lane in the faint hope that I might be rewarded at last. And I was. At length I saw her. And now you know where your daughter is to be found if you want to see her again. I am perhaps wrong to tell you this----"

"But where had she been?" the Countess exclaimed.

"Ah, it is easy to be wise after the event," Silva said. "She had been at school on the Continent for the past three years, and that is why all my efforts ended in failure. I did not mean to tell you this. I meant to have kept it to myself as a punishment for your heartless conduct all these years. But I must own that your arguments impressed me. I can see now how the child would have reminded you of her father. And that is why I have said so much. But, at the same time, this thing has been an indignity to the family which I cannot overlook. Lord Ravenspur will have to pay the price of his audacity. Blood is thicker than water----"

Silva appeared as if he would have said more. But he checked himself, and his words died away in low mutterings. In some respects it seemed to Mrs. Delahay that the man was sane enough. In other matters she was convinced that he was little better than a dangerous lunatic. Were they on the eve of another dreadful tragedy, she asked herself, or was this man merely uttering vapouring threats when he spoke in this fashion of Lord Ravenspur?

"You will do nothing rash?" she said.

A queer smile flickered about the corners of Silva's lips. His eyes were glittering like stars.

"Oh, I will do nothing rash," he said significantly. "I have been brought up in the wrong school for that. When we South Italians take our vengeance, we strike and strike hard. But it is done in the dark, so that the right hand does not know what the left is doing. But we never forget, and we never forgive."

Silva turned on his heel, and walked slowly and thoughtfully away. The Countess called for him to come back, but he took no heed. He might have been deaf to the sound of her voice.

"It doesn't matter," she said; "at any rate, I shall know where to find him again. But are you not coming back with me?"

"I think not," Mrs. Delahay said. "It is getting very late, and I must be returning to my hotel. But, if you like, I will come and see you again, only it must be stealthily and in the dark. You will quite see the advisability of our not being much together till this cruel mystery has been cleared up."

They parted at the corner of the street, and Mrs. Delahay continued her way slowly, always keeping the figure of Silva in sight. An impulse to follow him had suddenly seized her, though she had said nothing of this to her sister. She recollected vividly enough now the words that had passed between Silva and Stevens as to Lord Ravenspur, and the things that were going to happen tonight. For all she knew to the contrary, she might be the means of preventing another tragedy. She felt almost sure of this presently as Silva turned into Park Lane, and pulled up before Lord Ravenspur's house.

The street was quite deserted, so that the man had no great need for caution. He stood there just a moment longer; then coolly entered the garden by way of a side gate. Apparently he had come prepared for this. He let himself into the garden with a key. Very cautiously Maria Delahay followed. She noticed how dark the garden was, the shadows being all the more dense by reason of the blaze of light which came filtering through the glass dome of the studio. Though the glass was stained, and it was impossible to see through, the light inside was strong and steady.

Half hidden behind a bush the watcher waited developments. Presently she heard Silva creep cautiously to the side of the studio. Then, a moment later, to her amazement, she saw that he was slowly climbing to the top of the dome, by means of one of the ribs in the roof. The man appeared to be as lithe and active as a cat. The smallest foothold seemed to suffice him. He made his way to the top

of the dome, and Mrs. Delahay could see him peering in curiously. He stood just for a moment debating.

There was no time for further hesitation. It was very late now. Probably all the household had gone to bed, and doubtless Lord Ravenspur was alone in the studio. She knew something of his habits from her husband. Without a moment's hesitation she flew back into the road, and ran to the front door of the house.

She pressed the button of the bell. She could hear the ripple right through the house. It seemed to her as if no one was ever coming. Then presently there was the sound of a footstep inside, and the door was flung open by Walter Lance.

"Not a moment," she gasped. "Get to the studio at once."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WORTH OF A NAME.

The great house in Park Lane was brilliantly lighted up, and passers-by asked themselves what distinguished company Lord Ravenspur was entertaining tonight. Inside the house the master of it all was counting the moments till he should be alone. He was only giving an informal dinner, but the guests numbered upwards of thirty all the same. And now they were disported all over the house. Ravenspur sat in the great hall, with its mosaic floor and wonderful marble pillars. It was one of the show places of London, the envy of many whose means were greater than Ravenspur's. The veiled lights

shone through palm and fern. The sultry evening seemed to be rendered cooler by the murmur of the fountains. It was possible to sit there and see the fish darting hither and thither, so that the effect of being somewhat far away in the seclusion of the woods was complete. A tall, fair woman, marvellously attired, was languidly singing the praises of the place to her host.

"There is nothing like it," she said. "It is absolutely unique. We have tried the same effect in America, but, somehow or another, it seems so artificial, so wanting in repose. You are the most fortunate of individuals, Lord Ravenspur."

"So my friends tell me," Ravenspur smiled. "But you must not always judge by appearances."

If his guest only knew, Ravenspur thought. If she could only guess what his feelings were at that moment. The beauty of the place had been a delight to him at one time. He had enjoyed the planning and building, but now he would have changed it for the meanest cottage, if only he could approach to peace and comfort thereby. The house seemed full of omens. Danger seemed to lurk everywhere. No doubt those banks of palms behind the water gave a charming effect to the hall, but, then, an assassin might have hidden behind them, for they afforded plenty of cover. The genial smile was still on Ravenspur's face. No one would have guessed the grey tenor of his thoughts. Even the pretty woman by his side had no idea how anxiously he was watching the clock in the gallery.

Meanwhile, the guests flitted from place to place, and Ravenspur could hear the click of the balls in the billiard-room. Somebody was playing brilliant music in the drawing-room. Usually, Ravenspur's guests were loth to leave, and tonight was no exception to the rule; but presently they began to drift away, until, at length, Ravenspur was alone.

He heaved a deep sigh of relief. He rose and turned in the direction of the studio. As he did so a slim, white figure came down the broad stairs, and Vera Rayne stood before him. She was looking her very best tonight. There was an extra dash of colour in her cheeks, a sparkle in her eyes. The look that Ravenspur turned upon her was half affectionate and half sad.

"You did very well tonight," he said, "considering this is the first time you have done me the honour to act as hostess to my guests. You played your part quite to the manner born, Vera. We shall have no occasion to call in the services of Lady Ringmar any more. You will find yourself paragraphed in the papers now."

Vera did not appear to be listening. Her beautiful face had a grave look upon it now. She hesitated for a moment before she spoke. There was no hurry about her words, but Ravenspur could not fail to see that she was palpably nervous.

"It will not be for long, then," she said. "My dear guardian, can I have a few moments' conversation with you? It is not so very late, and one so seldom gets an opportunity."

"How grave you are," Ravenspur smiled. "We will go as far as the library, if you like, and then I can smoke a cigar and listen to your weighty utterances. Come along."

It was cosy enough in the library, and much more inviting of confidences than the stately splendour of the pillared hall. Ravenspur threw himself back in an armchair and lighted a cigar. Then he signified to Vera to proceed. Her lips were trembling now. Something bright and diamond-like twinkled under her lashes.

"You have been very kind to me," she said unsteadily.

"Have I really, my dear? Nothing out of the common, I am sure. And what have I done? Given you a good education and found you a comfortable home; and from first to last you have never caused me

a moment's anxiety. I have become as fond of you as if you were my own child. It will be a genuine grief to me when the right man comes along and takes you away from here."

"There is not much fear of that," Vera smiled wistfully. "Of course, you may think me ungrateful. You may say that I am showing a great deal of dissatisfaction----"

"My dear girl, you are not dissatisfied, surely?"

"I am afraid I am. You see, things cannot go on like this. I hate to have to talk in such a fashion, but the time has come when I must speak. All these years you have been showering benefits upon me. You have been treating me as if I were your own flesh and blood. The money alone that I must have cost you is enormous; and, so far as I know, I have not a penny."

"You will have when I die," Ravenspur said lightly.

"Oh, please don't talk like that; it makes my task all the more difficult. I have realised for a long time now that I cannot stay here, a dependant on your bounty. I can never feel sufficiently grateful for what you have done for me in the past. I could not possibly put my feelings into words; but I have made up my mind that I must get my own living in the future. It is a very hard thing to say, but I am going to leave you."

"Did anybody ever hear anything so foolish?" Ravenspur cried. "Why, this is your home. Is it your fault that you are utterly incapable of getting your own living? When I brought you here--a child in arms--I gave your father a solemn assurance that you should be my own daughter in future. I have made provision for you in my will. Some day you will be rich, as things go. And now you talk of leaving me in this cold-blooded fashion. Don't you see that I cannot do without you? But let me try and touch that gratitude of which you spoke. Surely, after watching over you so carefully all these years, you are not going to leave me at the very moment when you can make

something like an adequate return? You are practically mistress of the house now, and my welfare is entirely in your hands. Need I say any more after that?"

"Oh, you try me sorely," Vera cried; "and yet my path is quite plain. Even at the risk of incurring your displeasure, I cannot remain here. And now I come to the point. Before I go I want you to tell me who I am, and who my parents are."

"Yes; I think you have a right to know that," Ravenspur said thoughtfully; "but, if you don't mind, we will not go into that tonight. It is too late, and the story is too long. Believe me, you will be the happier for asking no questions. There is a dark tragedy behind your young life which is now forgotten, and I am perfectly sure you would bitterly regret it if you stirred the scandal up again. 'Let sleeping dogs lie,' Vera. Be content to know that you are of good family, and leave the rest alone."

The girl's face grew a shade paler. Her eyes had a suggestion of pain in them as she turned to the speaker.

"I think I understand," she murmured. "If my suspicions are correct, this is a great blow to me; but, having said so much, I think I must know the rest. And now, now you see how impossible it is that I can remain here much longer."

Ravenspur was silent for a moment. He had forgotten the little scene which he had witnessed some time ago between Vera and Walter Lance. So that was why she was going. She had given her heart to Walter, and only too late she had discovered that a marriage between them was out of the question.

The same subject was uppermost in Vera's mind. They were both looking at the same thing from a different point of view; and it seemed to Vera that if Ravenspur's words meant anything, it meant that she was not even entitled to the name she bore. Every drop of blood appeared to have left her heart. She stood there, white and

breathless. Yet, amidst all her storm of thoughts, one dominant idea possessed her. The time had come to strike now. There must be no further delay. She must leave the house. She must go out into the world to get her own living. She would stay here no longer under these shameful conditions.

"You have spared my feelings," she began. "I almost wish now that I had not asked you any of these---"

Vera broke off abruptly as the door opened, and Walter Lance came into the room. He looked uneasy and anxious. He started to say something to Ravenspur, then he paused, as he saw that Vera was standing there. In spite of the girl's utter misery and dejection, she did not fail to see that she was in the way now.

"I am just going," she said. "I am going as far as the drawing-room. When you have finished with your uncle I should like to have a few words with you, Walter."

"You had much better go to bed," Ravenspur said, with a sudden stern inflection in his voice. "It is getting late, and I am sure that you must be tired, Vera."

The girl made no reply. She walked through the door on the far side of the library and made her way into the drawing-room. Uncle and nephew stood there facing one another; they could hear the sound of Vera's piano softly played.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE NEXT MOVE.

"Well, and what is it now?" Ravenspur asked. "You look as if you had seen a ghost. Is there anything new in this ghastly business? Have the police solved the problem?"

"On the contrary, the problem gets more bewildering every hour," Walter said. "As you know, I was going to talk over our side of the puzzle with Inspector Dallas, and he gave me some startling information. As soon as ever I mentioned the Flavio business he told me that he had made a discovery which connected it closely with the death of poor Louis Delahay. It appears that there is in England at the present moment an Italian detective, called Berti, who had the Flavio affair in hand."

"I recollect the name perfectly well," Ravenspur murmured.

"It appears that Berti has seen Mrs. Delahay since the inquest. He was rather interested in the affair, and he contrived to get a sight of Mrs. Delahay. And now comes the most extraordinary feature of the story. Berti is absolutely certain that Mrs. Delahay is no other than Carlotta, Countess Flavio."

"Impossible," Ravenspur cried. "The man is mistaken."

"He is prepared to swear to his statement, any way," Walter said. "And, after all, I don't see why it should be impossible. In fact it is not in the least impossible, and I'll tell you why. After this amazing thing came out I thought it my duty to go back to the hotel and see Mrs. Delahay. I told her what Berti said, and taxed her with being a principal in the Flavio tragedy."

"And she denied it promptly, of course?"

"She did. She told me quite calmly that she had never heard of the Flavio affair. I confess her words staggered me, because they were so calm and self-possessed. I watched her narrowly when I was

speaking, and she never so much as changed colour. Even when I told her the story she appeared to be as mystified and puzzled as ever. She said, as she has always said, that for the best part of her life she has been more or less a recluse, and altogether out of touch with the world's happenings. You see, Berti was so confident, and Mrs. Delahay so self-possessed, that I was utterly puzzled."

"There is nothing to be puzzled about," Ravenspur said. "The Italian detective has made a mistake. His recollections of Carlotta Flavio's features after eighteen years have become blurred. For goodness sake, don't let us harp upon this absurdity. Surely, there are enough complications without this!"

"So I thought at first," Walter said. "But you will recollect telling me the story of your friend Count Flavio and his unhappy marriage. There were two Descartis--Carlotta, who married your friend, and Maria, who disappeared and was not heard of for years. Now isn't it rather significant, bearing in mind what Berti says, that Mrs. Delahay's name should be Maria?"

Ravenspur looked up with a startled expression.

"Well, yes," he exclaimed. "But I see you have more to tell me. Will you please go on?"

"I am coming to the interesting part now," Walter said. "Though I was prepared to believe that Mrs. Delahay knew nothing of the Flavio affair, I was by no means satisfied. I felt that there must be something in the Italian's story. I was certain of it when Mrs. Delahay admitted that her maiden name was Descarti. Oh, please let me finish. It was Mrs. Delahay's sister Carlotta who was the wife of your friend the Count. Hence the very natural mistake made by Berti. He had not seen the Countess, but her sister. The strong likeness between them would account for the misunderstanding."

"And this is really a fact?" Ravenspur cried. "Strange that it should not have come out before."

"But why should it, my dear uncle? You say that you never saw Count Flavio's wife. You have not the slightest idea what she was like. All you know is that she was an exceedingly bad woman, and that you rescued her child from a questionable future. On the other hand, Maria Delahay is secluded from the world for eighteen years. She is told by her parents that her sister is dead. She knows nothing of the terrible Flavio scandal. This is a fact, because she told me so herself. Indeed, we had it all out. She has to come back to the world again when her parents die. She is compelled to get her own living. It is only natural that she should change her name, and there you are."

Lord Ravenspur pondered over the matter for some time in silence.

"You saw a great deal more of the Delahays than I did," he said. "Practically I have not seen them together at all. Now how do they strike you? I mean, before their marriage, did you think that the woman really cared anything for our poor friend?"

"I am sure she did," Walter said emphatically. "Of course, there was no passionate attachment between them; they were too old for that. But I am quite certain that Maria Delahay's affection was sincere enough. After what I have seen the last day or two, I decline to believe that she had anything to do with her husband's death. I believed her when she said she never saw him from the time she left the hotel till she found him dead in the studio."

"And that opens up another theory," Ravenspur exclaimed. "If it wasn't Maria Delahay the witness Stevens saw that night in Fitzjohn Square, then it must have been her sister Carlotta."

"My word, that never occurred to me!" Walter cried. "And yet the solution is as simple as it is probable. I wonder if it is possible to obtain a photograph of the Countess?"

"There were plenty of them published at the time of the trial," Ravenspur said. "Of course, I mean in the illustrated papers. I have

got the whole of them somewhere upstairs. Not that I pay much attention to newspaper photographs, as they are rarely any use. I'll go and see if I can find one."

Ravenspur turned hurriedly and left the room. He was gone some considerable time, leaving Walter to stand there and ponder over the result of his night's adventure. The more he thought the matter over, the more complicated it became. He put the thing away from him almost petulantly. He was suddenly conscious of the fact that the music in the drawing-room was very soft and soothing. Then it flashed across him that Vera had something to say. Ravenspur might be a little time longer, and there was no opportunity like the present.

Only a portion of the drawing-room lights were on, together with the piano candles, and Vera sat there half in the shadow, a pathetic looking figure enough, in her white dress. As Walter approached he could see that her face was very pale, and that her eyes showed signs of recent tears.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "What fresh trouble is this?"

Vera's hands fell away from the keys. She rose from her seat.

"It is not altogether a fresh trouble," she murmured; "it is only the old one become more acute. Do you remember my telling you the other day that I felt how impossible it is for me to remain here any longer? But I must go away."

"My dearest girl, why?" Walter asked. "You know perfectly well how much I care for you. You know perfectly well that you could not look me in the face and declare that you do not love me as well as I love you. Now, could you?"

"That is what makes it all the harder," Vera whispered. "Oh, I am not going to prevaricate about it. We have always been good friends, Walter, and in the last few months I have realised that friendship has given way to a more tender attachment. Perhaps it was that which

opened my eyes. Perhaps it was that that made me ask myself some questions. I felt quite sure that Lord Ravenspur had guessed nothing of our secret. In fact, it was a secret to me till one afternoon in this very room. . . ."

"I am not likely to forget," Walter said tenderly.

"Well, then, you see I began to think. No father could have been kinder to me than Lord Ravenspur. I owe him a debt that I can never repay. But, though he has taken me into his house, and brought me up as if I belonged to his own flesh and blood, it does not follow that he considers me good enough for his nephew, the future holder of the title. And when he did find out not long ago, I saw at once what a dreadful disappointment it was to him."

"I am afraid it was," Walter said grudgingly. "But he did not set his face against it when I placed the thing before him in a proper light. He merely stipulated that our engagement must be a secret between us for the present. I am sure he is much too just a man, much too kind-hearted to spoil our happiness. You are too sensitive, Vera; your sense of honour is too high."

The girl's lips quivered piteously.

"Perhaps I am," she whispered. "But there is another thing which I have learned tonight, a thing which prevents me from remaining here an hour longer than is necessary. It is the question of my birth. I learned that tonight for the first time. Oh, do not humiliate me any further. Do not force me to speak any more plainly. If you knew the shameful story of my parents you would realise at once how unfitted I am to become----"

The girl said no more. She covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears. As to Walter, he was too astonished to speak. In the tense silence that followed the hall bell rang violently again and again. Vera looked up swiftly.

"You had better go yourself," she said. "It may be important." (She was deeply grateful for the interruption.) "Go yourself; everybody else is in bed."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BLOOD RELATION.

Walter choked down an ugly word that rose to his lips. He resented the intrusion just at a moment when he particularly desired to be alone with Vera. Who was it, he wondered, who came so late? And who rang so imperiously and persistently for admission? He flung back bolt and chain, and opened the door. With her nerves all unstrung, and with a certain intuition of impending calamity upon her, Vera had followed him into the hall. She had dried her eyes now; she showed little sign of her recent agitation. She heard Walter's exclamation as he recognised the intruder.

"Good heavens, it is Mrs. Delahay!" he cried. "What can you want here at this hour?"

"The studio," Mrs. Delahay gasped. "Get to the studio at once. If your uncle should happen to be there----"

"You can reassure yourself on that point," Walter said. "Lord Ravenspur is at present in his bedroom."

Maria Delahay pressed her hand to her heart. She gave a little gasp of relief. She was too breathless to explain. All she needed now was

a chair to support her failing limbs. As Walter stood there it flashed upon him that something wrong must be taking place in connection with the studio. He had not forgotten the vivid incident of the other night. Perhaps at this very moment the clue to the puzzle was in his hands. He turned round, and his gaze fell upon Vera, who was watching Mrs. Delahay curiously.

"Take this lady into the drawing-room," he said, "and wait till I come back. I shan't be very long."

Vera came forward with a sympathetic smile upon her face. A light was shining on her features. Maria Delahay could see how fair and sweet she was. And so this, she thought, was her sister's child. This was the girl from whom her mother had voluntarily separated herself for upwards of eighteen years. It seemed impossible, incredible to believe, but there it was. And the girl's hand was under Mrs. Delahay's arm now. She was being gently assisted as far as the drawing-room.

"I am sure you are Mrs. Delahay," Vera said, in her most sympathetic voice. "If all had gone well we should have met before now. I cannot tell you how sorry I am for you. I do hope this dreadful mystery will be cleared up before long. And now can I get you anything? I suppose you came to see Lord Ravenspur?"

Maria Delahay hesitated for a moment. There was no occasion to tell this beautiful child the dread import of her presence there. It seemed a wicked thing to bring her within the range of the trouble.

"I should like to see Lord Ravenspur, yes," she said "So you are his ward, Vera Rayne? Really, I cannot see any likeness between you and your father."

The words had slipped unconsciously from Maria Delahay's lips before she had time to think what she was saying. It was only when she noted the startled look in Vera's eyes that she realised the full extent of her imprudent speech.

"Did you know my father?" Vera cried.

"What am I saying!" Mrs. Delahay exclaimed. "My head is so dazed and confused that I don't know what I am talking about. Just for a moment I was filled with a foolish idea that you were Lord Ravenspur's daughter. It would be strange if you bore a likeness to him, seeing that he is only your guardian."

Vera was silent for a moment. Mrs. Delahay's impetuous speech had filled her with misgivings. She did not know, she could not feel sure that, after all, Lord Ravenspur might stand in closer relationship to her than that of a guardian. But she put the trouble out of her mind now. She had other things to occupy her attention. And after all said and done, the poor creature by her side was in deeper grief and anxiety than herself.

"I think I will go up and tell my guardian you are here," she said. "I know he will be glad to see you."

Vera was spared the trouble, for at that moment Ravenspur came into the room with a bundle of papers in his hand. He started as he caught sight of Mrs. Delahay.

"You here at this hour!" he exclaimed. "I hope----"

"No; there is nothing particularly wrong," the woman said. "I should like a few words with you if I am not intruding."

Vera discreetly left the room, and walked off towards the library. There was a stern expression on Ravenspur's face as he looked at his visitor. He waited for her to speak.

"I daresay you will think this is rather singular of me," she faltered, "but I came here tonight because your life is in danger. I believe that the man called Luigi Silva is under your roof at the present moment. You know who I mean?"

"I know perfectly well," Ravenspur replied. "It would be absurd to pretend to misunderstand you. And so it turns out after all that you are the sister of my poor friend Flavio's wife. Did Delahay know your identity before he married you?"

"He knew all there was that was worth knowing," the woman said, a little defiantly. "He knew the story of my miserable youth, for instance. I don't want you to misunderstand me. I don't wish to pretend that I had any ardent passion for my husband. But my affection was deep and sincere, and my loss is almost more than I can bear. Oh, I know what you are going to say. You are going to ask what I know about that wretched Flavio affair. I repeat in all sincerity that I knew nothing till the other day. I did not even know that my sister was alive, not until I visited her tonight at her house in Isleworth Road. I was not aware that she had married Boris Flavio. I did not know that she had a child----"

"Do you know who the child is?" Ravenspur asked swiftly.

"Yes; I know *now*," was the significant reply. "I have just been talking to her. What a beautiful girl she is! How sweet and natural! How open and candid is her face! It seems almost incredible to me that my sister could have forgotten her child all these years. I could not have done so."

"No; nor any other woman worthy of the name," Ravenspur said grimly. "But though you lived with your sister till early womanhood, you had no real conception of her character. I never met her myself, for which I am devoutly thankful. But I learnt enough, and more than enough, of her character from Flavio's letters to me. If ever a man was cursed with a fiend incarnate in the shape of a wife, Flavio was that man. Oh, I don't wish to give you pain, for you have suffered enough of late. But I know what I am talking about. The mere fact that you alluded to just now is proof positive that your sister is incapable of affection for her child. More or less by accident you have made this discovery tonight. By sheer chance you know

that your sister's daughter is under my roof. For a long time past I have known that some agency has been at work to deprive me of the girl, an agency so utterly unscrupulous that my very life is in danger. I suppose that man is acting for your sister, who has a sudden whim to gain possession of her child once more. And now I am going to ask you a favour. You are to say nothing of what you have found out tonight. I have told you what your sister is, and no doubt my words will prove true before long. I am going to ask you to give me a solemn promise that----"

"It is too late," Mrs. Delahay exclaimed. "Whatever my sister may be is all beside the point. She knows where her daughter is, and Luigi Silva knows also. He told us everything not long ago. I found out by accident that he was coming here. I saw him enter the house a few moments ago. I believe he is in your studio at the present moment. That is why I rang the bell so furiously; that is why I prayed I should not be too late."

Ravenspur started violently.

"Oh, this is intolerable," he cried. "One could hardly believe it possible that this is London in the twentieth century. I had thought that those insane vendettas had died out before this, even in Corsica. I must go at once and see----"

As the speaker turned away Maria Delahay held out a detaining hand. Her face was pale and pleading.

"Your life is too valuable to be risked in that headstrong fashion," she said. "Besides, I have already warned your nephew, who appears to know everything. He went off to the studio at once. I have no doubt that he has scared Silva away by this time. But why don't you put this matter in the hands of the police? Why run this risk when a few words would prevent any danger? And there need be no scandal. Silva could be warned. He would have to leave the country, and then there would be an end----"

"And this from you who are a half Corsican yourself," Ravenspur said reproachfully. "I could free myself from Silva, no doubt, but before many months had passed another man would take his place and my danger would be greater than ever. You see I have the advantage of knowing my present assailant. To quote the old saying. 'Better a devil you know than a devil you don't know.'"

Maria Delahay had nothing to say in reply. She was turning the matter rapidly over in her mind. It seemed to her that she could see a way out of the difficulty.

"I think," she began, "that perhaps-----"

The words were never finished, for suddenly the tense silence of the house was broken by a quick cry and the tinkling sound of broken glass. Then, in the distance somewhere, a door banged sullenly, and silence fell over the house once more.

CHAPTER XXV.

BRED IN THE BONE.

Meanwhile, Walter Lance had lost no time in reaching the studio. It did not need any elaborate explanation on the part of Maria Delahay for him to know that, in some way, the danger came from the man whom he knew as Valdo. Walter did not doubt that this was not the first time that the Corsican had visited the studio, though, as yet, he was utterly unable to grasp how it was that the attempt had been so successful.

There was danger here, and Walter knew it perfectly well, but he was too filled with indignation to think of anything else. So far as he could see, nothing had as yet taken place. The studio was absolutely empty, and the full blaze of the electric lights disclosed no danger.

Watching eyes were probably not far off, and it behooved Walter to be circumspect. He whistled an air. He strolled from place to place, ever and again glancing upwards to the roof. He felt quite convinced that it was the roof from which danger threatened, but there was nothing to be seen, no sign of movement in the branches of the acacia.

Still, the miscreant must be near at hand. He might even be watching the solitary occupant of the studio at that moment. Walter made up his mind what to do. He switched off all the lights and shut the door of the studio, at the same time affecting to turn the key in

the lock. If Valdo were hiding close at hand, he would take this for an indication that the studio was locked and closed for the night.

This being done, Walter crept back again and took up a position at the foot of an acacia. If Valdo entered the studio at all he was bound to come that way. Doubtless he had made his way over the roof, and presently it would be an easy matter to flutter from the dome on to the top of the acacia. Such a plan as this would present no difficulties to the flying man. Therefore, Walter braced himself for the effort which would be required of him presently.

He had not much doubt as to the issue. From the point of physical strength he was a match and more than a match for the Italian. There was just the chance that the latter might make use of his knife, but that had to be risked. A quarter of an hour passed slowly, and Walter was beginning to get impatient. What he most feared now was that Lord Ravenspur might return and demand to know why the studio was in darkness. This would probably have the effect of scaring Valdo away, and Walter would have all his trouble for his pains.

The minutes passed along, and no one came; but at length Walter's patience was rewarded. He heard a slight swish and sway in the branches of the acacia overhead. He could hear deep and regular breathing coming nearer and nearer to him. Then, presently, in the darkness, he discerned the lithe figure of the Italian. A moment later, and the intruder was caught below the elbows in a grip that made him fairly grunt again. He struggled just for a moment, but the steady grip seemed to crush the life out of him, and he desisted. Walter bore him back until his left hand shot out, and the whole studio was bathed in flame once more. Before Valdo could realise what had really happened, Walter's hands were all over him in a search for weapons. Nothing more dangerous come to light than a small sheath-knife, which Walter swept into his pocket. He was quite calm and self-possessed now. He coolly indicated a chair, into which Valdo flung himself sullenly.

"Now I should like to have a little conversation with you," he said. "You will recollect that we have met before."

"I have not forgotten the fact," Luigi Silva said sullenly. "It was at the Imperial Palace Theatre."

"Quite correct," Walter said. "I came to see that remarkable performance of yours. I was very much interested, and I must congratulate you warmly. At the same time, it seems to me that yours is a dangerous kind of entertainment."

A contemptuous smile flickered over Silva's face. "There is no danger whatever," he murmured; "anybody could do it if they had arms like mine."

"I am afraid you don't quite take my meaning," Walter murmured. "There are some cigarettes by your elbow. You had better help yourself, especially as I am likely to detain you some time."

With a defiant air the Italian took and lighted a cigarette. He did not appear in the least unnerved, though the furtive glances which he occasionally turned in the direction of his captor showed that his mind was not altogether at ease. He would have given much to know what Lance was driving at. He did not like to see the other quite so sure of his ground.

"My time is my own," he said. "Go on."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, your time is mine. But I dare say you will wonder why I am detaining you like this. To tell you the truth, since your last visit here----"

"That is not true," Silva cried. "I have never been here before!"

"Why play with me?" Walter asked contemptuously. "It is some days since you were here last. To refresh your memory, I am alluding to the night when you came here by way of the ventilator in the dome,

and made a murderous attack upon my uncle, who owes his life to the fact that I was not very far away. It is no use your denying this, because I am in a position to prove it. I dare say you congratulated yourself upon the fact that you got clear away. You would chuckle to think how mystified we all were. Here is a murderous onslaught made upon a public man in his own studio, from which there is no exit but the door; and on the night of the strange affair the door was locked. No one but a bird could have escaped through the ventilator. You can picture to yourself what a sensation the business would have caused if the police had been called in and the affair made known to the Press. Now I dare say you wonder why the police were not called in at once?"

Silva pulled at his cigarette savagely, but made no reply.

"Well, I am going to be more polite than you are," Walter said; "and I am going to tell you. I had a fancy to play the detective myself. I looked around for some sort of a clue, and at length I found one. Ah, I see you are interested."

"Only in my own safety," Silva muttered.

"Well, that is the same thing. On the floor close by where you are seated I found a shabby yellow playbill, advertising the performance of Valdo, the flying man, at the Imperial Palace Theatre. The bill was neatly folded, and was of recent date. Now I know perfectly well that neither Lord Ravenspur nor any of his friends would be interested in that kind of thing. Therefore, how did the bill get here? Probably left by the flying man himself, and a flying man would be the only kind of human being capable of getting in and out of this studio in that mysterious fashion. Upon this, I made up my mind to come and see you, and I did. I have only to place this information, together with my testimony, in the hands of the police. Indeed, I have only to send for a constable now and give you into custody. After that you would not be likely to give us any cause for anxiety the next seven years."

The Italian's eyes gleamed as he glanced restlessly about him. There was no reason for Walter to ask himself if his prisoner understood. Silva shrugged his shoulders.

"That is what you are going to do?" he asked.

"Oh, we'll come to that presently. In the meantime, I want a little information. You will remember when we were talking to you in the manager's room at the Imperial, a lady came in and addressed a few words to you. She was only there for a moment, but she stayed quite long enough for me to recognise her features. I want to know what Mrs. Delahay needed to see you for."

A sharp laugh broke from Silva's lips.

"You are very clever," he sneered. "Oh, so clever. So you are interested in Mrs. Delahay? You think, perhaps, that I know a deal about the murder of her husband. I know less about it than you do, and I have no concern with her at all. You had better ask her. She will probably be astonished----"

"Ah, I see what you mean," Walter exclaimed. "It was stupid of me not to grasp the problem sooner. Of course, it was not Mrs. Delahay at all I saw with you, but her sister, Countess Flavio."

Something like an oath broke from Silva's lips.

"Thank you very much," Walter said. "You could not tell me any more if you were ever so candid. And now I know exactly what brings you here. It is not robbery----"

"Robbery!" Silva broke out vehemently. "Sir, your words are a deadly insult. I am an honest man, though I may only be a servant; I would scorn to touch what does not belong to me."

"In that case you came here for violence, then," Walter said. "Yours must be a strangely illogical mind. You would not soil your hands

with another man's money, but you would not hesitate to stab him in the back under cover of the darkness. Come, don't let us argue any longer. You came here the other night to murder my uncle. But for a fortunate chance, Lord Ravenspur would be in his grave now. It is useless to deny it."

"Have I made any attempt to deny it?" Silva said, in a voice that was utterly devoid of passion. "Have I lied to you in any way? Oh, I see there is no mercy in your face, and doubtless if our positions were reversed, I should act as you are acting tonight. You are going to hand me over to the authorities. I shall be no worse treated if I tell the truth. I did come here to take Lord Ravenspur's life. I am only sorry that I failed."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FAITHFUL SERVANT.

The words were uttered with a grim coldness that caused Walter to shiver. This was worse than any outbreak of fury, worse than homicidal mania in its most acute form. The man was sane enough beyond all doubt, but, at the same time, he was a fanatic, prepared to gratify his vengeance, even if his own life paid the penalty.

"Well, that is candid, at any rate," Walter said. "You came here prepared to take my uncle's life. It was the second attempt that you made upon it. Oh, you know what I mean. You mistook a guest who was coming here for Lord Ravenspur."

"That was a mistake," Silva said coolly. "It was a mistake that I realised just in time. I should have greatly regretted any harm happening to an innocent party."

"I suppose it would have quite upset you," Walter said sarcastically. "But we are wandering from the point. What is the grudge you have against my uncle? You have never even seen him till quite lately. He has been an utter stranger to you."

A contemptuous smile flickered over Silva's face.

"I don't suppose I shall be able to make you understand," he said. "Your race is different to mine. The blood in your veins flows much slower and colder. You have no traditions in this country which are part of your religion. You cannot comprehend that it is one's duty to avenge insult and outrage, even at the cost of a life. In my part of the world a man would be held a coward who hesitated to retrieve his honour in such a fashion. But in this case it was not my honour, but the honour of the noble house to which I belonged. It would have been bad enough if the thing had been done by one of my own countrymen, but a stranger, like Lord Ravenspur----"

"I fail to see the distinction," Walter murmured.

"Ah, that is because you cannot understand. Look you here, signor. I have a mistress to whom I am devotedly attached. I would lay down my life for her. I would do anything to shield her from pain. Let us say that my mistress is married to a man who outwardly possesses all the graces that Nature can bestow. He has the intellectual gifts, too. He is widely beloved and popular wherever he goes. But at heart he is a fiend. The refined cruelties which he uses towards his wife arouse revengeful feelings in my breast, though I dare not gratify them, in case I perish, and leave my beloved mistress in a worse case than ever. But there are others of my clan also serving the noble house from which my mistress came, and they write the Count *the letter*. You don't know what that means, and I am not

going to tell you. But it is the death-warrant, and the Count knows it. He cannot appeal against that. All the forces of the Crown cannot save his life. And then, mysteriously, he dies. But he does not die before he has done one last piece of irreparable mischief. He sees a way to strike his wife to the heart from the other side of the grave. There is a child, perhaps the only thing on earth that the Count loves purely and sincerely. He gets his friend, Lord Ravenspur, to kidnap that child. I tell you if his lordship had come amongst us and dishonoured the threshold of the greatest chief in South Italy he could not have unlocked the floodgates of vengeance in a more thorough manner. Think of the degradation, the bitter insult of it all! If the true facts of the case had been known to me at the time, Lord Ravenspur would have been a dead man years ago. But when my mistress vanished from the world, I naturally thought that she had taken the child with her. I did not know until quite recently what had happened. Then when I cast my mind back to the past I had no difficulty in fixing upon Lord Ravenspur as the culprit. The rest you know."

The words were quietly and evenly spoken, but the deep ring of sincerity in them was not lost upon Walter Lance. Here was a man who saw his way clearly before him, a man blinded by prejudice and bigotry, who would not hesitate for a single moment, who would laugh contemptuously at the mere suggestion of personal danger.

"What could you do afterwards?" Walter urged.

Silva shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Why go into that?" he said. "The honour of the house would be avenged. I should have done my duty, and have earned the approbation of my friends. There would be a great outcry, no doubt. The thing would be inquired into, and probably the child I speak of would have been restored to her mother, though, to be sure, I am not quite certain whether the Countess is a proper person-----"

"So you have your doubts on that score?" Walter cried eagerly. "Now is it not a fact that the Countess Flavio was notoriously a woman of evil disposition?"

"Everybody said so," Silva replied. "Had I chosen, I might have thrown a different light upon it. Mind you, I am not pleased with my late mistress; but there were excuses plausible enough. I cannot forget that it was a horrible thing for a mother to go off and leave her only child all those years. Still, that is no matter. If the time ever came, I could show the world something which would open their eyes as to the doings in his lifetime of Count Flavio. He kept a diary. After his death I found that diary."

"And you did not produce it at the trial?"

"To what good, signor? Popular prejudice was so strong against us that, beyond doubt, the prosecution would have proved that diary to be a forgery. Then I should have been cast into prison, and my mistress would have been deprived of the one protector whom she so sorely needed. Why, feeling ran so high at the time of the trial that it was dangerous for me to walk the streets alone at night. But why discuss this now? Why continue this unnecessary conversation? You have made up your mind what to do. You have only to ring the bell, and there is an end of me----"

Silva paused and shrugged his shoulders significantly. He rose as if to take another cigarette. The box slipped from his hand, and some of the little white tubes rolled across the polished floor. With an apology for his clumsiness, he stooped to pick them up. Then he rose again, his right hand shot out in the direction of a figure in armour, grasping a huge battle-axe in its hand. With the swiftness of an animal, the battle-axe was snatched away, and before Walter could realise what had happened, the Italian had smashed a couple of the heavy plate-glass sheets, thus clearing a way into the garden. Walter yelled at the top of his voice and darted forward, but he was too late. He realised the folly of a search in the darkness. No doubt,

by this time the man was far away. He opened the studio door, which closed suddenly behind him, owing to a draught which came streaming through the broken panes. He saw Lord Ravenspur standing before him in the corridor, with a white face and agitated manner.

"What is it, Walter?" the latter asked hoarsely.

"I'll tell you presently," Walter said. "Only you must get the women-kind away first. It is quite imperative that Vera should know nothing, though it doesn't in the least matter in Mrs. Delahay's case. She knows all about it."

Mrs. Delahay, followed by Vera, was in the corridor by this time. The girl's face was pale. There was an inquiring look in her eyes.

"It is really nothing," Walter said. "Just a little accident on the polished floor of the studio. One of the servants will have to sleep in there tonight in case of intruders. It is a great pity we haven't got one of the dogs from uncle's place in Hampshire."

"It is terribly late," Mrs. Delahay exclaimed, with a significant glance in Walter's direction. "Really, I ought to be back at my hotel long ago. I suppose I can find a cab?"

"I will go and find one for you," Walter said. "Hadn't you better go to bed, Vera? Don't forget that you are likely to be up very late tomorrow night."

Very few words sufficed to tell Mrs. Delahay what had happened.

Walter saw her into a cab, after which he returned to the house. He was relieved to find that Vera had already retired. Lord Ravenspur was walking moodily up and down the library.

"One of the grooms is going to sleep in the studio," he said. "We can get the damage repaired tomorrow. And now tell me everything. I

am certain that you have something unpleasant to disclose."

Walter told his story at some length. Lord Ravenspur followed with every sign of interest.

"Oh, I can quite understand that man's point of view," he said. "You see, I know something about those people. When I was quite a young man I spent a year or two in Corsica, and, to a certain extent, I sympathise with them. I have committed an outrage on the national honour, and I am to pay the penalty with my life. The thing is recognised out there. It is regarded as quite commonplace."

"And there is no way of clearing yourself?" Walter asked.

"Well, perhaps there is one," Ravenspur said thoughtfully. "You see, the head of the family can interfere. Vera's mother is in a position to say---- But what am I talking about? My dear boy, my life is in danger, and I am afraid that even if we lay Silva by the heels there will be others. But, come what may, I am going to ask for no clemency. Come what may, Vera shall never pass into the custody of that vile woman whom she has the misfortune to call her mother. Nothing shall induce me to change my mind. Indeed, such a thing would be a violation of my promise to the dead."

"Your sentiments do you honour," Walter said; "but, unhappily, I don't see how you can carry them out."

CHAPTER XXVII.

FLIGHT!

It was a long time before Lord Ravenspur replied. He paced up and down the studio immersed in his own gloomy thoughts. Then gradually his face cleared, his eyes flashed with resolution.

"I begin to see my way," he said. "It is not for my sake, but that of the child. I hope you will believe me when I say I am no coward. If it were six months hence I could laugh at the danger, because, whatever happened to me, I should have succeeded in my purpose. In six months' time Vera will be of age. At the expiration of that period she can become a naturalized British subject. Then the Crown will look after her interests, and see that the estates which she will some day inherit are properly administered. Six months hence Vera will be her own mistress. She has already been informed what her mother is like, and she will know how to behave towards that woman. It will be a satisfaction for me to know that we have baffled those bloodthirsty wretches after all."

"And in the meantime?" Walter asked. "Don't you think we should have Silva arrested, so that at any rate we should be safe as far as he is concerned? We could easily find him."

"I don't think so," Ravenspur said, thoughtfully. "I know my enemy by sight, which you will admit is a very great advantage. If another assassin comes along, he will have a tremendous pull over me. Besides, you made a suggestion just now which gave me a brilliant idea. You said that it was a pity we hadn't got the dogs here. We will have a couple of bloodhounds up the first thing in the morning, and one of them shall sleep in my bedroom, the other in the studio. The hounds are not in the least dangerous to those who know them. But I pity the midnight intruder who comes along and gets introduced to one of them. That will be one way of protecting myself for a time, and it will give the scoundrels something to do to devise fresh means of putting an end to me. I have thought it all out, and the best thing we can do is to disappear."

"Disappear!" Walter cried. "What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say. The thing can be done tomorrow night. There is nothing easier."

"But tomorrow night we are going to Lady Ringmar's great reception," Walter urged. "I understand that it is to be one of the biggest things of the season, and I know that Vera is looking forward to it with the greatest possible pleasure."

"Well, we can go," Ravenspur said, a trifle impatiently. "Now my scheme is this: we go to Lady Ringmar's, and stay there till about two o'clock in the morning. We take certain wraps with us, and we leave the house, not in one of the carriages, but in a hired fly which will subsequently take us to Waterloo Station. By special train we will go down to Weymouth, and at that point hire a yacht to convey us to Jersey. There we shall be able to stay a few days, and settle our plans. The servants can easily get all we want together early tomorrow morning, and send the bags down to Weymouth as luggage in advance. The next day the papers will contain the information that Lord Ravenspur has suddenly been attacked with a mysterious illness, and that he has been ordered to leave London at once. As perfect rest and quietness are prescribed, he is keeping his address a secret, and has given strict orders that no communication of any kind is to be forwarded. Even the servants in Park Lane will profess not to know where we have gone, which will be nothing less than the truth. How does the idea strike you?"

Walter murmured something in reply. As a matter of fact, he was not in the least in love with the scheme, though Lord Ravenspur appeared to be so eager and happy about it, that he had not the heart to throw cold water on the programme. From his more youthful point of view, the idea of flight seemed cowardly. He would have placed the matter in the hands of the police. He would not have shrunk from the utmost publicity. But still, there was Vera to be considered. The girl's future was of the first importance.

"Very well," he said, "I will give up my time tomorrow to getting ready. I suppose now that you won't want me to telegraph to the Hampshire place for the dogs?"

"Oh, I think you had better," Ravenspur said. "One never knows what may turn up. And there is always the chance of the secret being discovered. And now let us go to bed, and try to get some sleep. I haven't had a night's rest for a week. I am longing to find myself on board a yacht again. I shall be safe there at all events. Good-night, my boy."

It was after lunch the following day that Vera came into the billiard-room in search of Walter. The latter had practically finished his preparations. He had done everything that his uncle had entrusted to him, and there was nothing now but to wait the turn of events. In a well-regulated establishment like that of Lord Ravenspur's, everything had proceeded smoothly enough. By luncheon time the whole of the boxes and portmanteaux had been packed, and the luggage despatched. Still, there was a perplexed look in Vera's eyes as she came into the billiard-room.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Walter," she said. "I want to know what is the meaning of all this mystery. I have seen enough baggage leave the house to supply us with all we want for a season in Scotland. When I asked my maid what she was doing, she simply said that she had been instructed by the housekeeper to get my things ready. Of course, I raised no objection, but I should certainly like to know what it all means."

Walter looked a trifle embarrassed. He had quite forgotten that Vera might show a natural curiosity.

"We are going away for a little time," he explained. "The fact of the matter is, your guardian has not been at all well lately. But you must have noticed that for yourself. He has had a great deal to try him, too, and he is afraid of a breakdown. We are going to Weymouth

direct from Lord Ringmar's House, and not a soul is to know anything about it. You see, if we stay and make elaborate preparations, it will take quite a week to make a start. It is far better to let people know afterwards that Lord Ravenspur has been ordered away peremptorily, and that he is to have perfect rest for the next month or so. Only I can't sufficiently impress upon you the necessity of keeping this thing absolutely secret."

"Even from Lady Ringmar?" Vera cried.

"From everybody," Walter said, somewhat sternly. "Vera, your guardian is in great danger. You are in great danger yourself. I dare not tell you more now, but perhaps I shall be permitted to say it later on. Go about your business or pleasure to-day just as if nothing had happened."

Vera asked no further questions. She was perhaps just a little hurt that Walter had refused to take her into his confidence. At the same time, she was young and vigorous, and the thought of a change was not displeasing. She passed out of the house presently with a view to a walk in the park. She stopped before a feeble, blind old man who was dolefully grinding out hymns on a dilapidated organ. A boy of some ten or twelve years was guiding the unfortunate man along the pavement. Vera took out her purse, and placed a shilling in the little tin cup which the boy was carrying.

"I have not seen you here before," she said kindly.

The man murmured something to the effect that this was his first day with the organ. He seemed uneasy and undecided in his manner, and, naturally enough, Vera put this down to the strangeness of his surroundings. Then she hastened on to the park, and the little incident passed from her mind. She had tea subsequently with a friend in Grosvenor Square, and when she came back, barely in time to dress for dinner, she saw that the blind man was still in the Lane, grinding industriously at his melancholy airs.

"I suppose Walter has told you," Ravenspur said as they sat down to dinner. "You know where we are going?"

"He told me part," Vera said. "Really, I don't quite understand what all this mystery means."

"Indeed, it is absolutely necessary," Ravenspur said gravely. "It is as necessary for your happiness as it is for mine. I have done my best to safeguard your welfare----"

"Oh, yes, yes," Vera cried contritely. "I am a most ungrateful girl to speak in that way. After all, I am looking forward to the trip. It is probably the last happy time we shall have together. Yes; I have quite made up my mind to get my own living. But we won't discuss that tonight."

Dinner was over at length and the carriage was ordered round. Vera came downstairs presently; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were sparkling. She was very alluring and attractive in her white dress. She had made up her mind to be absolutely happy tonight. The dress was a special present from Lord Ravenspur, and Vera had been afraid to ask what the Paris house had charged for it. Still, it was the last extravagance she was going to put Lord Ravenspur to.

"I declare there is my old blind man still," she said, as she got into the carriage. "He must have been here all day. I must make inquiries, and see what I can do for him."

The door of the carriage was banged to, and the horses trotted away. As they passed the spot where the blind man was standing he suddenly ceased his doleful airs and whistled softly. A moment later and a shabby figure came shuffling down the Lane.

"That's right, Stevens," the blind man said in a quick, clear voice. "Now here's the note, and, mind, you are not to deliver it before half-past twelve. This is most important. If you are successful, come

back to me at the appointed spot, and I will see that you get your money--fifty pounds."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VERA'S WARNING.

Amongst her many friends, and in the keen enjoyment of the evening, Vera forgot her fears. She was young enough to appreciate to the full the joys of life. She was strong and vigorous, and most things pleased her. Besides, there was always the reflection that the gates would be closed to her before long. Once she had taken her fate in her own hands, and had gone into the world to get her living, there would be no more of this. A little longer and she would say goodbye to Lord Ravenspur and Walter. Of course, the wrench would be a bitter one, for she was by no means blind to the hardships and privations of the poor.

Still, she put that out of her mind now. She was going to have a very pleasant evening, and by this time tomorrow she would be far away from the heat and dust and bustle of London. In her mind's eye she could see the yacht sliding over the water. She could see the moon shining on the waves, and turning their crests to molten silver.

The big house was crowded to its utmost capacity, for Lady Ringmar was one of the most prominent of society women, and invitations to her entertainments were eagerly sought after. The rooms were filled. At the end of the long corridor Vera caught a peep of the garden, all

aglow with points of flame from the electric lights entwined about the trees and shrubs.

An hour or so passed pleasantly enough; then, as the heat grew more intense Vera's mind turned to the garden. There were huge blocks of ice, looking deliciously cool, behind banks of ferns. The air hummed with the noise of electric fans, and yet the atmosphere was heavy and enervating. Supper was a thing of the past, and Vera stood at the head of a flight of marble steps, which led to the garden. She was quite alone. She was looking for Walter, whom she had not seen for some little time. She turned with a smile as someone murmured her name. She saw that it was Ravenspur's friend, Sir James Seton, who was standing by her side.

"So you are all alone," he said. "What are those young men thinking about? It was very different in my day."

Vera smiled somewhat faintly. She had every respect for Sir James. He was kindly disposed enough, but in the eyes of youth he was regarded as something of a bore. There was no help for it when he suggested a turn in the garden.

"Certainly," Vera murmured; "only I don't want to walk far. I have enjoyed my first season in town immensely, but I am beginning to long for the fresh air in the country again."

"Quite right," Sir James agreed; "just the same with me. Why people box themselves up in London during the most beautiful months in the year I can't imagine. They talk about England being a decadent country! A man wants a real stamina to struggle through the three months which we call the season. Some of these men are a perfect marvel to me. Take Ravenspur, for example. That man works as hard as any man in England. He is here, there, and everywhere, and yet he finds plenty of time for this sort of thing, too. If there is anybody I envy, it is Ravenspur."

"I am sure you have no need to envy anybody," Vera laughed. "Besides, in many ways you are very like him. Most people see a strong resemblance between you two."

Sir James chuckled as if well pleased with the compliment.

"Do you really think so?" he asked eagerly. "Well, I suppose what everybody says is bound to be true. At the same time, these resemblances are not always desirable. For instance, look what happened to me only the other day."

"And what was that?" Vera asked.

"Don't you know? It was the last time I dined with your guardian. Didn't they tell you about it? It reminded me of the days when I was a soldier--quite an adventure, too, I assure you. I was coming up Cheyne Row, more or less in the darkness, when a man darted out of the shadows, and attacked me. I had some difficulty in beating him off. I don't know whether the man was mad or not, but his intentions were quite serious."

"Really!" Vera exclaimed, with widely opened eyes. "And what became of the man? Was he locked up?"

"Oh, he got away before I could do anything. Still, it was very unpleasant while it lasted, I assure you."

"It must have been," Vera said thoughtfully. "But, my dear Sir James, I don't quite understand what this adventure has to do with your likeness to Lord Ravenspur."

"Oh, well, I had almost forgotten that. You see, when the fellow rushed at me, he addressed me as Ravenspur, just as the hero of the melodrama addresses the villain when he is caught in the last act. There is not the slightest doubt that I was mistaken for your guardian. Indeed, as soon as the man realised his mistake, he drew off at once. I am rather surprised they did not tell you."

Vera was listening uneasily enough now. In the ordinary course of events she would have heard all about that mysterious occurrence. Why had they kept the knowledge from her? As she sat there thinking the matter over, she began in her mind to piece events together. So this sudden flight from London was dictated by personal fear on the part of Lord Ravenspur. He wanted to get away from this relentless foe. There was no other way to safeguard himself than by this yachting cruise. And hitherto Vera had never detected in her guardian the slightest sign of nervousness or fear. This foe, then, must be a man of extraordinary determination and tenacity of purpose.

Vera could see it all more clearly now. She recollected the disturbance in the conservatory on the night of Sir James Seton's visit to Park Lane. She recollected with even more significant force the cries and the shattering of glass in the conservatory the previous evening. And why, for the first time in his life, had Lord Ravenspur caused the bloodhounds to be brought up from Hampshire? All these questions Vera asked herself, but she could think of no reply. In some vague way her woman's instinct told her that she was mixed up in the business. If so, it would never do for her to desert Lord Ravenspur at this critical moment. She would have to stay by him until the danger was past.

She sat there replying to the chattering remarks of her companion at random, until even he saw how preoccupied she was.

"I am afraid you are not quite yourself tonight," he said.

"I am sure I beg your pardon," Vera murmured. "I am not quite myself. I wish you would do me a favour, Sir James. Would you mind finding Walter and sending him to me?"

Sir James trotted off obediently enough, and presently Walter came along. He looked somewhat warm and heated.

"I am sorry I couldn't find you before," he said. "We have been having a bit of fun in the drawing-room. It was rather a nuisance, too. What do you think happened? But you will never guess. One of the dogs got away and actually followed us here. I found three or four ladies held up by one of the brutes in a drawing-room. They were frightened to death, not knowing what a peaceful creature poor Bruno is in the ordinary way. I had to lead him away and tie him up to one of the trees in the shrubbery."

Vera smiled as she thought of the terror which the great hound would naturally inspire. No doubt he had managed to get away from Park Lane and had tracked them to Lady Ringmar's house.

"He will be quite quiet where he is," she said, "and we can take him with us when we go. I shall be glad to get away. I am longing to leave London behind me now."

Walter looked anxiously at his companion. He saw how pale and disturbed she was, how distressed her features were.

"What is the matter?" he asked tenderly.

"I was going to tell you," Vera replied. "I have had a considerable shock tonight. I have learnt something which you tried to conceal from me. Oh, I am not blaming you, because I am sure you only acted for the best, but I have just been having a conversation with Sir James Seton, and he was telling me all about the attack that was made on him the other night when he came to dine with us. I was dreadfully grieved to hear what he had to say."

"But, my dear girl," Walter protested, "really----"

"Oh, yes, I know. You are thinking about me now," Vera said. "But it is rather too late. That murderous attack was made upon Sir James Seton because the miscreant mistook him for Lord Ravenspur. There can be no doubt about it, because Sir James told me so. And when I heard that, other strange circumstances flashed into my mind. For

instance, those two mysterious occurrences in the studio. Now, tell me honestly, Walter, is the danger really great?"

Walter hesitated a moment before he replied.

"I am very much afraid it is," he said presently. "It is all a question of time. And you must not regard Lord Ravenspur as a coward, because he is nothing of the kind. I am certain that he is acting in your very best interests----"

"Ah, I thought I was at the bottom of it somewhere," Vera cried, as Walter bit his lip. "I was absolutely convinced of it. Oh, I know I couldn't tell you why, except that my instinct warns me. But am I not to know, Walter? Am I to go on being treated as a child? You have both been very good to me, and the mere suggestion that I am a danger and a burden to you fills me with pain. Won't you take me into your confidence? I am no longer a child."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MESSAGE.

"If the secret were only my own I would not hesitate a moment," Walter said. "Be patient a little longer, my dearest girl. I am quite sure that Ravenspur will tell you when the proper time comes. Once we are on board the yacht there will be no occasion for further secrecy. Another hour, and we shall be on our way. I am not a nervous man, but this thing is beginning to worry me."

Vera persisted no further. The band had just ceased playing, and there was a sudden rush of guests into the garden, so that there was no opportunity for further privacy. A somewhat imperious dowager pounced down upon Walter, with a request that he would find her daughter, and there was nothing for it but to obey. Just for a moment Vera stood in the midst of a laughing, chattering group of friends, then she managed to slip away unseen. She wanted to be alone and think this matter out.

She was just a little hurt that the others had not taken her into their confidence. Still, perhaps Lord Ravenspur had acted in this way to save her pain and annoyance. He had always been kind and considerate to her. She owed him a deep debt of gratitude. And yet, up to a few moments ago, she had been prepared to turn her back upon her best friends and face the world alone. But she could not do that now. She would have to abandon her plans for the future. She would have to stay by Lord Ravenspur's side until this terrible danger was past. She was only a girl, and could not do much. Still, that little she would do cheerfully.

Vera was still busy with these painful thoughts when a footman came up and spoke to her. He had a note on a tray, which he handed to Vera, with the intimation that there was no reply. So far as Vera could tell, the handwriting was quite strange to her.

"Who brought this?" she demanded.

"It was left by some strange man, miss," the servant said. "I was to give it to you at once, when you were alone, if possible."

The footman's manner was perfectly respectful. He discreetly said nothing of the sovereign which had accompanied the letter. Vera turned away and broke the seal. She was in a somewhat secluded part of the garden now, but she had no difficulty in reading the letter with the aid of the sparkling points of flame which glimmered from the branches of the overhanging trees.

"My dear child (the letter ran),

"I want you to read this alone. I want you to promise me that it shall be shown to nobody. I daresay you will wonder why I write like this, after all these years, but I can only plead that circumstances, not myself, are alone to blame. I want you to believe that up till quite recently I was hardly aware of your existence. But all these things I can explain when we meet. Naturally you will ask yourself who I am, and why I should venture to address you in this fashion. You will see presently.

"For the last eighteen years you have dwelt under the roof of Lord Ravenspur. You have passed as his ward, and I understand that he has taken the greatest care of you. This much goes to his credit. But that he behaved like a scoundrel at the outset I am prepared to prove. Had it not been for him we should not have been parted all these years, and you would have had a better chance of making the acquaintance of your most unhappy mother.

"There, I have told the truth at length, and now you are aware who it is that thus addresses you. When we meet I shall be able to explain why I did nothing all these years--but I am wasting time. I know that you are going away tonight. I know that you may be out of London for some months. At present, circumstances do not permit me to claim my rights, or to interfere with your plans. You will go away this evening just as if nothing had happened, but before you go it is most imperative that I should see you, if only for half an hour. I have had this letter sent you by a trusty friend, who will not fail me. If you will go through the shrubbery at the back, to Lady Ringmar's house, you will find a pathway bordered with nut trees, which ends in a green gate, leading to the lane at the back of the house. There you will find another friend, who will bring you to me without delay. I give you my word I will not detain you more than half an hour. Then you can return to your friends as if nothing had

happened. They will be none the wiser. Indeed, I will ask you not to mention this letter to them at all.

"I am not going to anticipate your refusal, for I know that you will come, especially when I sign myself

"Your unhappy mother,

"CARLOTTA FLAVIO."

In a state of mind bordering on absolute bewilderment, Vera read the letter again and again. It filled her with a pain which was closely akin to shame. So far as she could see, there was no mistaking the relationship which at one time had existed between the writer of the letter and Lord Ravenspur. A natural craving and desire to see her mother came over Vera. She knew there was yet time to get away from Lady Ringmar's house and back again before the hour fixed for their departure. Vera slipped the letter inside her dress, and with a firm, determined step strode off in the direction of the shrubbery. She came presently to the spot indicated in the letter. She looked eagerly around to see if anybody awaited her. There was the faint suggestion of cigarette smoke lingering in the air, and then, from a turn in the path, the figure of a man emerged. Vera could see that he was exceedingly well turned out in evening dress. The dust coat he was wearing only partially concealed a slim built, athletic figure. For the rest, the man was good looking enough, and Vera judged from his dark eyes and black moustache that he was a foreigner, doubtless some relation of her mother. He lifted his hat with great courtesy, and waited for the girl to speak.

"I am Vera Rayne," she said quite simply.

"I am already aware of that," the stranger replied. "I suppose you received the Countess's letter? But you must have done so, otherwise you would not be here. You are prepared----"

"One moment," Vera said. Caution had suddenly returned to her, and there was something in the eager light in the man's eyes now that warned her to be careful. "I shall be glad if you will let me know who you are. What is your name, for instance?"

The gleam in the stranger's eyes deepened in intensity, a quick frown knitted his brows.

"Can it in the least matter?" he demanded. "You have received the letter, and it is only for you to obey."

There was a peremptory ring in the speech which Vera did not like at all. She realised that she was in a lonely part of the grounds, and that, in case of need, assistance was a long way off. She began to wish that she had been more prudent. After all, the whole thing might be a plot against her happiness, a scheme into which she had fallen without asking herself a single question. These doubts became something like certainties when the stranger strode past her and cut off all means of retreat.

"You are wasting my time," he said, "and time is precious tonight. It is only a matter of half an hour altogether, and then you will be back with your friends once more. If I were not anxious for your welfare do you suppose I would be here at all?"

The speaker's English was good enough, but Vera did not fail to detect the foreign accent behind it. She was becoming afraid now. Her heart was beating faster. She turned to see if assistance might not be at hand. But the thick belts of shrubs cut off all sounds. She could hear absolutely nothing in the direction of the house. And then there was another cause for fear. Surely she could hear something creeping stealthily through the bushes. She listened again, and the footsteps seemed to grow closer. Then the bushes parted, and a great black head and a pair of gleaming eyes emerged, followed by a long, heavy body that crept up to Vera's side and rubbed against her dress. A cry of thankfulness escaped her.

"Bruno!" she panted. "How did you get here?"

Then she remembered the dog had followed them from Park Lane. He had been tied up by Walter in the shrubbery, and the broken cord attached to his collar told the rest of the story. The great hound lifted his head. The glittering amber-coloured eyes were turned on

the stranger, and a deep growl came from the depths of the dog's throat. The small man in evening dress stepped back.

"That dog is very dangerous," he stammered.

"Not while I am here," Vera said coldly, "though, perhaps if he met you here alone you might have cause for uneasiness. And now, sir, will you be so good as to tell me your name?"

"Amati," the stranger said sullenly. "But what does it matter? You have made up your mind by this time whether you are coming with me or not. You know perfectly well, from the letter in your possession, that I am a messenger from your mother. I have a cab outside the lane, and I can take you to her at once. I pledge you my word that you shall be back in half an hour."

Still Vera hesitated. Still her suspicions refused to be lulled.

"It would be an easy matter for my mother to have come here," she said. "There is not the slightest chance of being interrupted. And seeing that time is so short----"

The last words were inaudible, for there was a shrill whistle somewhere in the garden, and the dog by Vera's side whined uneasily. As Vera stooped to soothe him she twisted her handkerchief in the hound's collar. She recognised the whistle as Walter's. Then she gave a sign and the great beast bounded away.

CHAPTER XXX.

LOST.

A peculiar grim smile came over the face of the man who called himself Amati. He hesitated no longer, but with a single bound had reached Vera's side, his arm was around her neck and his right hand pressed to her lips before she could utter a sound.

"Be silent," he hissed, "and all will be well with you. Believe me, I wish to do you no harm. You are quite safe with me."

There was nothing for it but to stand there obedient to the speaker's will. Then, from his lips, came the sound like that of a bird startled from its nest in the night. The green door opened, and another man appeared. Almost before Vera knew what was happening she was half led, half carried through the door and deposited in a cab. It seemed to her that her senses were fading away, that there was something peculiarly sweet and faint smelling on the handkerchief which her assailant had pressed to her lips. The cab drove away swiftly, and the lane was left in silence once more.

Meanwhile the evening was passing on, and Ravenspur was anxiously waiting for the moment when it would be time to get away. Walter came into the garden presently, wondering what had become of Vera.

"I have been looking for her, too," Ravenspur said. "That is the worst of a great crush in a great house like this. It is so difficult to find anybody. We must be off in a quarter of an hour from now. What is all this I hear about one of the dogs?"

"Oh, that is true enough," Walter laughed. "It was old Bruno. I suppose he managed to get away from Park Lane. At any rate, he followed us here and I found him holding up some people in one of the drawing-rooms. I thought he might just as well come to the station with us, so I tied him up in the shrubbery. When I went to see if he was all right just now I found the rascal had got away again. He came back when I whistled, but I couldn't get him to

come to my side. I suppose he was afraid of getting a thrashing. However, he is lying down quite good in the shrubbery now, so there is no cause for worry. I daresay that it would be rather alarming for some of these women to be suddenly confronted with the dog when they were carrying on a tender flirtation in one of the arbours."

But Lord Ravenspur was not listening. He looked anxious and worried and full of trouble.

"Oh, Bruno will follow the cab right enough," he said impatiently, "and I daresay the other dog is at the station by this time. I wish you would go and find Vera for me. It sounds foolish, I know, but I have an absurd idea that something may happen just at the last moment. It is always the way when one is overstrung."

Walter went off on his errand cheerfully enough. The moments passed, but he did not return, and the feeling of anxiety on Ravenspur's part deepened. Finally, Walter returned, with a face as anxious as Lord Ravenspur's own. He caught the latter's arm almost fiercely.

"I begin to think you are right," he whispered. "I cannot find Vera anywhere. One of her girl friends tells me that she last saw her quite alone going off in the direction of the pathway behind the shrubbery. That was half an hour ago. What she could be doing there I haven't the remotest idea."

A smothered groan escaped Ravenspur's lips.

"I had half expected this," he muttered. "Something of the kind was bound to happen. She has been lured away, or she has been kidnapped. When you come to think of it, it is quite an easy matter in grounds as large as these. It seems quite hopeless to try and fight against these scoundrels. Depend upon it, they have found out our plans in some mysterious way, and have taken this step to thwart them at the last moment. But how did they manage, how could they have communicated with Vera? And what extraordinary allurement

did they hold out to her to induce her to go off with strangers in this way? Oh, the thing is maddening!"

"I don't know," Walter exclaimed. "I only know that we are wasting time, and very precious time at that. Now, let me see, what would be the most likely thing to appeal to the sentiments of a young girl like Vera? I should say something to do with her mother. That, you may depend upon it--a letter from her mother. We can very soon see whether my suspicions are right or not. I'll go out into the hall at once and interview the footmen."

A group of idle, lounging footmen were loafing in the hall. Walter went straight to the point.

"Which of you gave Miss Rayne a letter just now?" he demanded. "And who brought it? Come, speak out!"

The strong, determined voice was not without its effect. One of the footmen came forward and murmured that he had taken the letter and delivered it to Vera.

"It was about half an hour ago, sir," he explained. "No, I don't know the man who brought it. He looked like a small tradesman, or respectable clerk. All he told me was to give the letter to Miss Rayne and see that she had it at once."

"And you were to give it to her when she was alone?"

"Well, yes, sir," the man admitted. "The messenger did say that. You see, there was nothing strange--"

"Oh, of course not," Walter said impatiently. "You were to give it to Miss Rayne when she was alone, and you had a handsome tip for your pains. Was not that so?"

The man's face testified to the fact that Walter's shot had hit the mark, but the latter did not remain there a single moment longer. He

had not lost sight of the fact that a cross-examination of a servant would probably have led to a deal of idle gossip, in which Vera's name would have been mixed up; and besides, the footman was obviously an innocent party, and had told everything that he knew in connection with the letter and its delivery.

"It is just as you feared," Walter said, when he reached Ravenspur's side. "A respectably-dressed man came here half an hour ago and left a letter for Vera, which was to be delivered to her when she was alone. The thing was done, and that is how the mischief began. I feel quite sure that I am right, and that that letter came, or purported to come, from Vera's mother. The poor child would naturally go off, thinking no evil. You may depend upon it that that scoundrel Silva is at the bottom of it all. He cannot strike you in one way, so he has made up his mind to deal the blow in another direction. There is no time to be lost."

"But how on earth did they find out our plans?" Ravenspur groaned. "All the servants are to be trusted."

"I've got it," Walter said suddenly. "Don't you recollect that blind organ-grinder that Vera was so interested in? He was hanging about Park Lane all day. Those sort of people have regular beats, and he has never been seen there before. He saw all that baggage going away, and drew his own conclusions. It would be an easy matter to have the stuff followed to Waterloo Station, and find all about the special train from the porters. But what are we going to do? Are we going to raise an alarm?"

"Not yet," Ravenspur said hoarsely. "Don't let us have any scandal as long as we can possibly avoid it. I'll go out with you and we'll make another search of the grounds first. We may find some sort of a clue, and if we do we can follow it up without anybody being any the wiser. Lady Ringmar will simply think that we went off without saying goodbye, and there will be an end of the matter as far as she is concerned. Now come along."

The two slipped out into the grounds again and made a rapid search of the garden. In the shrubbery they found the great hound, Bruno, patiently waiting there. Apparently he seemed to think that his time for punishment was past, for he crept up to Walter's side and rubbed his great, black muzzle against his knee.

"Here's an inspiration," Walter exclaimed. "If Vera went away at all, she must have gone by the back gate. We will put Bruno on the scent, and if--Hallo, what's this?"

The dainty white cambric, with its fringe of lace, caught Walter's eye. He withdrew the fragment from under the dog's collar and held it up to one of the points of electric flame.

"Here is a clue with a vengeance," he exclaimed. "This is Vera's handkerchief. Depend upon it, this is a signal to us that the dog must have been with her at the time she went, and she must certainly have gone voluntarily, or the dog would have made short work of the person with whom Vera departed. She took this way of letting us know she had gone, and most assuredly she must have gone by the back gate. What a lucky thing it was that the dog came here tonight. Let us put him on the scent at once."

"Your suggestion is an inspiration," Ravenspur muttered. "But we can't go quite like this, you know. Run back to the house and get our coats and hats. Don't be long."

Walter was back in a minute or two with the wraps. Then he laid his hand on the dog's collar and led him down the path at the back of the shrubbery. The great beast appeared to know exactly what was wanted of him, for, after throwing up his head and giving vent to a long-drawn howl, he placed his muzzle on the ground and scratched furiously at the door. When the road was reached, at length, the dog tore along at a furious rate, so that the silk scarf twisted round his collar tired Walter's arms terribly.

Still, that did not matter, as they were making good progress now. They went on and on, passing street after street, until the dawn came, and they were in a distant suburb. Before an attractive-looking house, the blinds and shutters of which were closely drawn, Bruno paused and threw up his head.

"This is the place right enough," Walter whispered. "Be careful. If we are seen everything is spoilt."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MISSING LINK.

It was practically daylight now, so that the greatest caution was absolutely necessary. It was possible to obtain cover behind a group of thorn bushes and take observations of the house. But even that did not lack risk, all the more so because of the presence of the dog. The great hound had served his purpose, and it was essential that he should be got rid of, for the present at any rate.

The house itself was quite a good one. The grounds were neat and trim. The flower boxes in the windows ablaze with bloom. The place spoke for itself as the residence of some prosperous individual who, in all probability, was somebody of importance in the City. It was the last place in the world to associate with crime and violence. In front of the house was a fairly large lawn, shaded by shrubs and trees. A kitchen garden at the back was bounded by a lane, and on the far side of this stretched a wide open common covered with gorse and bracken.

"Have you any idea where we are?" Lord Ravenspur asked.

"Not the faintest," Walter confessed. "I have never been here before. The only thing I am sure of is that Vera is in yonder house. But let us get away from here and talk it over. The further this thing goes, the more sure I am that we have foes to deal with who are clever as they are unscrupulous."

"But where shall we go?" Ravenspur asked.

Walter suggested skirting round the back of the house, and so on to the common. Once there, they found shelter enough, for the gorse was high and the bracken was deep. Indeed, a regiment of soldiers might have hidden there with perfect safety.

"I think I begin to see my way," Walter said. "One of us must stay here and the other get back to London without delay. If you don't mind, I should like to consult my friend Venables about this business. He is very clever and courageous, and, besides, he has a decided fondness for detective business. I think you will agree with me that we want another hand?"

"We want half a dozen," Ravenspur murmured. "What we really ought to do is to place the matter in the hands of the police and have yonder house searched at once. Yet, I am very loth to do that. I am exceedingly anxious to prevent anything like a scandal, and this is the very sort of thing to appeal to the cheap Press. But what are we going to do about our journey to Weymouth? What would the officials at Waterloo think when we didn't turn up last night? And, again, there are all the servants in Park Lane. If you can only show me some way to stop the mouths of these people I shall be grateful. You know what servants are."

"I think that can be managed," Walter said after a thoughtful pause. "You stay here while I go back to London. I will return as soon as possible. Oh, of course, I will bring a change of clothing with me. It

would be madness to hang about a suburb like this in evening dress. We should be spotted in a moment."

It seemed to Ravenspur that there was no help for it. Anxious and troubled and worn out as he was, he could not be altogether blind to the absurdity of the situation. The idea of a man in his position hiding himself on a London common, dressed as he was, seemed ridiculous. He had no more than a dust coat over his evening dress; he was wearing the collar of an Order. Still, as he looked about him he took fresh heart of grace. The common appeared to be little frequented. There were deep hollows here and there, full of bracken and brambles, under which it was possible to hide. There was no prospect of Walter getting back within the next three hours. There was nothing for it but to make the best of the situation.

Meanwhile, Walter was hurrying back to London. He made a wide *détour* of the common, so that it was not possible for him to be seen from the house. Then presently he struck a main road on the far side of which ran a railway line. He could see in the distance the buildings and signals that marked a station. At any rate, he would be able to find out where he was without displaying his ignorance by asking questions. It was still quite early, only a little past five o'clock, as Walter found on consulting his watch. After all said and done, the station was not much use to him, for probably no train would run within the next couple of hours. Presently there was a clatter of hoofs behind, and an empty hansom came along. The sight of the cab was proof to Walter that he was not very far outside the radius. A happy idea came to him.

"Are you going back to town?" he asked the cabman.

"Well, yes, sir," the cabman explained. "I have been taking a fare out to Cannon Green."

"Then you are just the man for me," Walter exclaimed. "My man has failed to turn up, and I was going to try the station. I suppose that is

Cannon Green station just at the end of the road?"

"That's right, sir," the cabman said civilly. "But you'll get no train yet. Drive you anywhere you like, sir, for half-a-sovereign."

Walter jumped into the cab without further hesitation. A ride of a little over an hour brought him to Park Lane. A sleepy footman opened the door, and regarded Walter in amazement. He had his story all ready. There had been misunderstanding on the previous evening, and Lord Ravenspur and Miss Rayne had gone on to Weymouth by an early train. There was something very paltry about this deception, but at the same time it seemed to Walter to be absolutely necessary. He roused his own man; together they packed a couple of portmanteaux, which Walter gave directions should be taken to Waterloo Station without delay, and left in the cloakroom. Once he had satisfied the curiosity of the household in Park Lane, he went on promptly to Venables' rooms. Over a hasty breakfast he explained everything that had happened to his companion. As he expected, Venables at once threw himself heart and soul into the adventure.

"I quite understand your point of view," he exclaimed. "What you want to do is to hang about all day and take observations. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary that we should arouse no suspicions. I think I can see my way. This is a matter of disguise. We can pick up all we want in this direction in Covent Garden on our way to the station."

"There is only one thing that worries me," Walter said, "and that is Bruno. What shall we do with him?"

"Oh, that's all right," Venables cried. "Very well-trained dog, isn't he? So much the better. You see, in the course of my adventures I have come across some pretty shady specimens of humanity, though I am bound to say that I have found many of this class pretty faithful when they are well paid. Now I know a fellow at Cannon Green who

will look after the dog for us for a consideration. He is a fancier himself, and always has a few animals for sale. What more natural than that he should have a bloodhound on the premises? Mr. Bill Perks is more than suspected of being a receiver of stolen goods, and on two occasions has been in trouble. Still, he knows me, and will do anything I like, provided I pay him handsomely. Don't let us waste any more time."

An hour later and the two adventurers left the train at Cannon Green, bearing a set of instruments such as those used by surveyors when they are planning and laying out new land. Their disguise was slight enough, but quite sufficient for the purpose. Both wore smart looking caps, edged with gold, so that their appearance was sufficiently formal and official. In addition to this Walter carried a bulky bag, which contained a complete change of clothing for Lord Ravenspur. The latter was glad enough to see Walter and Venables. He breathed a little more freely when he found himself clad at length in a Norfolk suit. He rather rebelled against a showy white helmet and a set of long grey whiskers which Venables proceeded to attach dexterously to his face. A few touches of grease paint and pencil, together with a pair of big spectacles, rendered the disguise complete. Walter expressed his admiration.

"I can hardly believe that it is you, uncle," he said.

"And you are changed almost out of recognition," Ravenspur said. "Really, I must compliment Mr. Venables. And now, I suppose I had better hide the bag in these bushes. We have a very anxious day before us, I am afraid, but that does not prevent one feeling the call of Nature. I don't think I was ever so ravenously hungry in my life. Where can we get some breakfast?"

Venables, who seemed to have thought of everything, had already solved the problem. There was a very fair hotel not far from the station, and it would be an easy matter to hide the surveying outfit till it was needed. In the first place, they could skirt round the edge

of the common, and pay a call on the man Perks, who would look after the dog till his services were needed again.

They came at length to Perks' house, a rather dilapidated looking place, with a large, untidy garden around it. There were sheds and huts and kennels at the back, so that the intruders were greeted with a terrible din of barking as they went up the path.

"Cunning hand, Perks," Venables explained. "It is very little he makes out of dog-fancying. But see how useful these animals are. Day or night the police can never approach the place with the object of raid without Perks having ample notice. But come along, and you shall see the man for yourselves. Oh, you needn't trouble yourself about your disguise. Perks is not in the least suspicious nor will he ask any questions. He will only think that you are a couple of amateur detectives like myself."

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Roused by the angry uproar of the dogs, a tall, round-shouldered individual appeared in the doorway. He had a melancholy cast of face which was intensified by the lank black hair which hung upon his shoulders. Indeed, the man looked more like some street preacher than a suspect with a record of crime behind him. But the eyes were shrewd enough, and so was the smile with which Perks greeted Venables when the latter disclosed his identity.

"Ah, well, you was always one for your little games, sir," he said. "Take care of that dog for you? Of course I will. And a rare beauty he is. Is there anything else, gentlemen?"

"No," Venables explained. "Mind the dog is for sale if anybody asks questions. You have had him for some time, and you want a big price for him. Maybe we shall be able to find a job for you after dark tonight, but as to that I can say nothing for the present. At any rate, there is a five-pound note for you so long as you are discreet and silent. I suppose I can come into your house and write a letter? I'll get you to post it presently."

Perks intimated that his house was at the disposal of the visitors, and they all trooped inside. The place looked cosy and comfortable enough, though it was somewhat untidy. At one end of the table was a china bowl, which was filled with odds and ends of small gold and silver ornaments. Venables winked at Perks, and the latter grinned sheepishly. He snatched up the bowl, and hastily removed it to a side table. Ravenspur held out a detaining hand.

"One moment," he said, "I am rather fond of those kind of things. I don't wish to be inquisitive, or to ask idle questions, but unless I am greatly mistaken you have a Commonwealth porringer amongst those things. I should like to look at it."

Perks bowed to the inevitable. He cursed himself slightly under his breath for his folly in not removing everything, but he felt safe in the hands of his visitors. They would not be likely to ask any questions as to whence the plunder came. By the time that Venables had written and stamped his letter, Lord Ravenspur came forward with a small metal disc in his hand.

"This is a bit of a curio in its way," he said. "Intrinsically it is worth very little, only a few shillings at the outside. If you like to take a sovereign for it----"

Perks fell in with the suggestion eagerly enough. There was no reason to stay any longer, and the trio set out for the hotel, feeling now that it was possible to move without the slightest fear of alarming the inhabitants of the cottage on the common.

"I suppose that was stolen property we caught Perks looking over?" Ravenspur asked.

"Not the slightest doubt of it," Venables said coolly. "I daresay if we had been voted suspicious the signal would have been flashed back to the house to hide it at once. But if you thought it was stolen property, Lord Ravenspur, why did you invest in that little disc which you took such a fancy to?"

"I am going to tell you something startling," Ravenspur replied. "Walter, you recollect that little ornament which I bought in Rome, and subsequently gave to poor Delahay who took a great fancy to it? I had his initials engraved on the back. He wore it on his watch-chain."

"I recollect it perfectly well," Walter said. "Delahay was wearing it the last time I ever saw him. But what has all this got to do with your purchase of this morning?"

"Only that it happens to be the same thing," Ravenspur said quietly. "I recognised it in a moment. Oh, there is no mistake. Here is the disc for you to examine for yourself. You will see the initials and the date on the back of it. As soon as we get time, we must ascertain from Inspector Dallas if Delahay's watch was missing when his body was found. If so, then this opens quite a new phase of the mystery. On the whole, I am not at all sorry that we came here to-day. Of course, I kept my knowledge to myself, because I didn't want to arouse Perks' suspicions. But if we can contrive to find out from whom he bought this thing we shall be going a long way to clear up the mystery of poor Delahay's death."

The matter was discussed at some length over the breakfast, to which all of them did ample justice. Once this was finished, they made their way back to the common again, and sat down on the grass to mature their plan of campaign.

"Now what we want to do," Venables began, "is this. We want to be in a position to make a close study of yonder house without arousing the suspicions of the people there. I racked my brain for a long time before I could think of a feasible scheme. And then it came to me like an inspiration. What could we do better than pass ourselves off as an Ordnance Survey party down here on business? That is why I procured the official-looking caps, to say nothing of the theodolite and the notebooks. Now you, Lord Ravenspur, have only got to look wise and give us directions. You look exactly like the head of an exploring party. We will pretend to work the theodolite, and make measurements, and all that kind of thing."

"Inside the grounds?" Walter asked.

"Of course," Venables went on; "that is the beauty of the scheme. No spot of ground is sacred to an Ordnance party. I have actually seen them work inside a church. All we have got to do is to go about our business boldly and be quite firm if anybody attempts to molest us. It may be news to you that nobody can be prosecuted for trespass unless specific damage is done."

The instruments were recovered presently from the hiding-place, and with the theodolite on his shoulder Venables stepped boldly on to the lawn in front of the house, and gravely went to work. The blinds were all up by this time. The windows were opened, and a glimpse of well-furnished rooms could be seen in the background. A couple of maids stood in one of the windows, and watched the strangers curiously.

"It looks respectable enough," Venables muttered, pretending to be exceedingly busy. "You may depend upon it, this is a tougher job

than we anticipated. These servants are all right. You may be sure that they know nothing of what is going on. However, to make certain, I'll ask them for myself."

Venables approached the window and asked civilly for the loan of a small piece of string. He came back presently, after a chat of a minute or two, and once more appeared to be wholly engrossed in his instrument. At the same time, he was telling his companions the information which he had gleaned.

"I knew I was right," he said. "The house has been let furnished to an Italian gentleman called something or another, I didn't quite catch what, and the people only came down yesterday. Those servants go with the freehold, so to speak, and they have all been in their present situation for some considerable time. Their master is a City stockbroker, who, with his family, is on the Continent for the next month or two. If we are lucky we shall probably get a sight of the Italian presently, though I expect we have all got a pretty shrewd notion who the gentleman is."

The work proceeded gravely for a quarter of an hour. Levels appeared to be taken, and there was much entering of figures in the notebooks. Presently, as Walter glanced around him, he drew a deep breath, for there was no mistaking the identity of the slim figure that emerged from one of the open French windows and came striding eagerly down the lawn.

"Silva," Walter said under his breath. "Don't pretend to see him till he gets quite close. I think it would be a good thing if we left all the interviewing to Venables."

The Italian approached the group and superciliously demanded to know what they were doing there. He looked quite the master of the place in his cool, flannel suit. He had a cigarette between his strong, white teeth.

"Why are you trespassing here?" he demanded. "Don't you know that this is private property? Go, or I will call in the police and give you into custody."

"The police won't help you in this case," Venables said with the air of a military man who is quite sure of his ground. "We are here on Government business. I don't know if you understand what I mean, but we are surveying, and nobody has a right to interfere with us, providing we do no damage. We can come into the house if we like. Indeed, I am not quite sure that we shan't have to. I see you have got a flat roof, sir, with railings round. If we have occasion to take the theodolite up there I will ring the bell and let you know."

The whole thing was so coolly and naturally done that Silva was taken aback for the moment. Evidently he had come out of the house full of suspicion, and with the fixed intention of getting rid of these intruders as soon as possible. There was an uneasy look in his eyes as Venables suggested the roof of the house as the field of action. He deemed it wise to shift his ground altogether.

"That will be very inconvenient," he said, in quite another voice. "I hope you will be able to manage without that if you can. However, if you will give me an hour's notice, I daresay----"

But Walter was no longer listening. He was standing up regarding the house with a professional eye. His gaze vaguely took in a dormer window immediately under the roof. There were bars to the window, pointing to the fact that at some time or another the room had been used as a nursery. The window was blank for a moment, then a face appeared and looked out.

That instant was enough for Walter. There was no mistaking those features. They were those of Vera Rayne.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE.

It was with the greatest difficulty that Walter restrained himself. He dared not look round again until Silva's back was turned and the Italian returned to the house. Even then it would have been impolitic to make a sign, for there might be prying, suspicious eyes looking from other windows who would understand, and then the whole of Venables' ingenious scheme would be wasted. Turning sideways, Walter glanced up again. It seemed to him that he could still catch the outline of Vera's figure. Then a desperate idea occurred to him. He stooped down and went through all the motions of patting and caressing some favourite animal. There was just the outside chance that Vera might take this as an allusion to Bruno, and the knowledge that the dog had put her friends on her track. The girl was sharp and quick enough, and she might easily, in the light of events, guess the identity of the trio on the lawn. Before Walter could speak, Venables glanced in his direction and smiled.

"Well, did you see it?" the former asked.

"Did you see it, too?" Walter exclaimed. "I am glad of that because now I know I was not mistaken."

"See what?" Ravenspur asked, apparently busy with his notebook. "I didn't notice anything."

"It was Vera," Walter whispered. "Whatever you do, don't look up now. I daresay you happened to notice a dormer window in the roof, with bars in front of it. Well, a moment ago, I saw Vera's face there.

What a fortunate thing it was that we thought of the dog last night! I knew he would not lead us astray."

"So far, so good," Venables murmured. "And now, don't let us forget what we are here for. The next thing is to go to the back of the house and go through the same pantomime there. What I want to do is to find the easiest way of getting into the place, and to ascertain how many people there are in the house, and where they sleep. For that purpose it is necessary to be as near the back door as possible. I shall want you two to keep up the masquerade while I pump the servants. With any luck we shall have got all we want to know by lunch time."

Venables was as good as his word. By two o'clock the survey was complete, and the trio were trudging off to their hotel to talk the matter over. It was in a little arbour in the garden, over cigars and coffee, that Venables unbosomed himself.

"It is like this," he explained. "I told you before that those servants were quite innocent of anything going wrong in the house, and so it turns out. The tenant is Silva, and his sister, the countess of something or another, whose name doesn't matter, though it will be necessary to see the lady later on. There is no basement, and, as far as I could see, there would be very little difficulty in obtaining entrance to the house by means of a small window that gives light and air to the larder. On the ground floor are four living rooms, which we need not trouble about. There are four bedrooms on the first floor, and four on the second, to say nothing of the room in the roof. I didn't dare to be too curious about this roof room, but I am told that Silva uses it himself for certain experiments, and that, as his experiments are dangerous, he keeps the key in his pocket. The explanation sounds simple, and quite suffices for the servants; but I think we have got a pretty fair idea of what is going on in that roof room. I have managed to make a rough sort of plan of the bedrooms, so that we shall be fairly safe when we come to break

into the house, as we shall have to do, soon after midnight, if you are agreeable."

"Isn't that rather a dangerous proceeding?" Walter asked. "I didn't know that you added housebreaking to your other accomplishments. Being amateurs, we are certain to make a noise, and you may be pretty sure that Silva only sleeps on one ear."

"Oh, that part will be managed for us all right," Venables said coolly. "The housebreaking item of the programme will be carried out by Perks. The rascal knows he is quite safe in our hands, and he will do all that is necessary for about a ten-pound note. Once his work is accomplished we will send him about his business. The rest we can manage ourselves. It will go hard, indeed, with us if Miss Rayne is not back in our hands again before daylight."

Walter could think of no better scheme to offer, so that Venables was allowed to have his own way. There was nothing for it now but to pass the time as best they could till midnight. The hours stole slowly on. The darkness deepened and night came at length. Dinner had been a thing of the past for some time, and it was getting near eleven o'clock before the trio, accompanied by Perks, made their way in the direction of the common. They lay quietly on the turf there till a distant church clock struck twelve, then Venables jumped to his feet and declared that the time for action had arrived.

It was nervous enough work, and Walter was wishing it well over. There was no trouble in getting into the garden, and round to the back of the house, to the point fixed upon by Venables as being the most likely for their purpose. They had all been provided with silent shoes by Perks, though no questions were asked as to whence they came. Now that the pinch had come Perks was by far the most confident of the party. Probably his previous experiences in this line were standing him in good stead.

Coolly enough he produced a dark lantern and turned the disc of flame down, so that it shone alone upon the bag of tools which lay upon the grass. He picked out one presently, and proceeded, in perfectly noiseless fashion, to cut out a disc of glass to which he had previously affixed a sheet of brown paper by the aid of the tallow from a candle. Once the instrument had severed the glass, the portion cut away fell noiselessly into Perks' hand, so that he had no difficulty in placing his arm inside and pulling back the catch. The window was now open, but it was sufficiently small to make entry into the house a matter of some difficulty.

"I think you had better try first," Venables whispered to Walter. "You are the most agile. Just work your way through and go round to the front door and let us in. I don't think you need stay any longer, Perks."

"I am not quite so sure about that, sir," Perks grinned. "It is a very common practice with people to fasten their scullery and kitchen doors. I think I had better stay here till the gentleman has made sure."

A grim, silent moment or two followed. Then, surely enough, Walter came back with the whispered information that the kitchen door was locked. Perks chuckled to himself as he snatched up another instrument and squeezed through the window. He set to work in business-like fashion, so that the kitchen door was forced at length without the slightest noise, and the way to the hall was clear.

In the strange, unfamiliar darkness, Walter stood for a moment until his eyes should become accustomed to the objects all about him. One by one they began to loom out of the blackness. He could make out chairs and tables, the outline of a square hall, and the front door at the end of it. He set his teeth together, now filled with a stern resolution to succeed or lose his life in the attempt. He was not ignorant of the class of man he had to deal with. He knew that Silva would not hesitate to shoot him down like a dog if his presence were

detected. But, surely, between the three of them, they would be able to manage? It only needed to find Silva's room, to go in there and overpower him. Once he was helpless, to get up to the roof room and rescue Vera was the work of a moment.

With these sanguine thoughts uppermost in his mind, Walter cautiously made his way in the direction of the front door. It was not difficult to draw the bolts or take down the chain. But the trouble lay in the fact that the door was also locked, and the key had vanished. Therefore, any idea of admitting his companions that way had to be definitely abandoned.

Still, there were the windows, and French windows at that. But even this scheme was frustrated by the knowledge, gained a moment later, that all the living rooms on the ground floor were locked and the keys taken away. It was a disconcerting moment, and Walter hardly knew how to proceed. There was no help for it but to return by the way he had come and tell the others of his discovery. As to Lord Ravenspur, he was far too big a man to squeeze through the larder window, so that the perilous task would devolve entirely upon Walter and Venables.

As Walter stood there he became conscious of the fact that a feeble ray of light was penetrating down the well of the stairs. Acting on the impulse of the moment he crept up a few of the thickly carpeted stairs until he was in a position to command the landing. The light penetrated from one of the rooms, the door of which was slightly open, so that Walter was fain to look in. It was only a night-light, after all, standing on a small table in the middle of the room. Even from that distance Walter could see that a letter lay by the side of the light, or, rather, a sheet of paper with a message upon it. Powerful curiosity drew him on, and he snatched up the sheet of paper. There were only two or three lines, but Walter recognised, with a thrill, that they were in Vera's handwriting. He had no time to read, before a sudden rush of cold air from somewhere extinguished the feeble light. Worse than this, the current slammed the door to

with a bang that shook the whole house. It was so utterly unexpected, and the darkness was so intense, that Walter could only stand there utterly lost as to his surroundings.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STRANGE HOME-COMING.

Vera opened her eyes at length. Gradually the things that had happened came back to her. She recognised the futility of resistance. All she could do was to wait and hope for the best. But despite the startling rapidity with which events had moved, she was not in the least frightened. Her prevailing feeling was one of indignation that any man should have dared to treat her in this way. Withal, there was a certain vein of curiosity that Vera did not care to suppress. The cab was still moving briskly, and Vera judged by the trees on each side of the road that they were already out in the country. The man sat opposite her, grim and silent. He made no inquiry as to how Vera was getting on. He suggested no apology for his violence.

The feeling of languor and the suggestion of headache passed away, leaving Vera strong and vigorous again. It was impossible to sit there without speaking.

"Do you quite understand what you are doing?" she said to the man opposite. "Do you realise that you are guilty of a criminal offence? You could be prosecuted for this."

"I will not contradict you," Silva said politely. "Believe me, I deeply regret the necessity for taking this step. Yet it was impossible to satisfy our requirements in any other way."

"Oh, you are not alone, then?" Vera asked. "Would it be inquiring too much if I asked who else is in this business?"

Silva smiled under cover of the darkness. A man of courage himself, he admired that quality in others. So the child that he had known, and been so passionately attached to, eighteen years ago had grown up to be a worthy representative of her race? Vera would have been astonished at that moment if she could have seen into the back of Silva's brain. She did not realise for a moment that here was a man who would have gone through fire and water for her, and yet, at the same time, he was prepared to wreak his insane vengeance upon those whom she loved and admired more than anybody in the world. If Vera's happiness had depended upon it, Silva would not have spared Ravenspur, even had Vera gone on her knees and asked for it. Yet he would have given his life if it could have done any good to this proud descendant of the house of Descarti.

"Surely you can guess who is with me in this business?" he said. "Did I not bring you a letter from your mother?"

Vera started. She had forgotten her mother for the moment, and this question of Silva's had opened up a new and painful train of thought. He was taking her to see her mother. But why had her mother so suddenly displayed this tender solicitude, after leaving her absolutely alone all these years? That Vera's mother was in possession of her whereabouts, and had been all this time, the girl did not doubt. When part of the story had to be told she had accepted Ravenspur's statement implicitly. Her mother was a vile woman, and the past was too painful for a young girl to hear. Ravenspur had not said so in as many words, but that was distinctly the impression he had conveyed to Vera. She began dimly to comprehend now why this new-born affection of her mother's had not found vent in the conventional way. Doubtless Ravenspur would have forbidden her the house. Doubtless he had a hold that gave him the control of the situation--probably a compact made years ago. And now one of the parties desired to break it. Perhaps it was a

question of money, or family property, or something of that kind? Vera had heard of similar cases.

At any rate, there must be some reason for this mystery and violence. And no doubt every word that Ravenspur had said about her mother's character was true. Otherwise she could not have consented to an abduction like this. Still, there was comfort in the reflection that Lord Ravenspur and Walter would leave no stone unturned to punish this outrage. The miscreants would be found out sooner or later. Vera congratulated herself now upon the fact that she had left her handkerchief tied to the collar of the dog Bruno. That would be a sufficient clue to put her friends on the trail, and Bruno himself, with his unerring instinct, would lead the pursuers to the right place. After all, the imprisonment could not last long, though Vera boiled with indignation as she thought of the treacherous way in which she had been deceived.

"And you are going to take me to my mother, then?" she asked.

"That is the programme," Silva said coolly. "Unfortunately, you will not be able to see the Countess tonight. You may believe me or not, but I am sorry to have been compelled to take a step like this. But you see, Lord Ravenspur's plans made it quite impossible for me to wait till tomorrow."

Vera was silent for a moment. She could see plainly that Ravenspur's clever scheme for getting away to Weymouth had been betrayed by someone to this man. Her chief anxiety for the moment was for her guardian. It was terrible to think that he had been dogged and watched by people so cunning and unscrupulous as these. Vera was still thinking the matter over when the cab stopped and Silva bade her get out. A wild idea of appealing to the cabman for assistance was dismissed as she caught sight of his face. There was a grin upon it, and the driver unmistakably winked at Silva. There was just enough light for Vera to see that the cabman was not wearing a badge. Doubtless he was a conspirator, too. There was nothing for it

but to see the thing through to the finish. So Vera followed Silva through the garden till he paused at length on the steps of a house, which appeared to be in total darkness.

"The servants have gone to bed," Silva explained, as he opened the door with a latchkey. "If you will wait a moment, I will turn up the gas. If you desire anything----"

"Nothing," Vera said curtly. "All I want you to do is to show me to my room. I wish to be alone."

Silva bowed politely enough. He turned and locked the door, and Vera saw that he dropped the key in his pocket. Then he took a silver candlestick from the hall table and handed it to Vera, intimating that he would like her to precede him up the stairs. They came at length to a room in the roof of the house which appeared to be comfortably, almost luxuriously furnished, and with every feminine requirement at hand. With absolute amazement Vera saw her own silver toilet set laid out on the dressing table, her handbag was on the floor, and in one corner of the room stood the two dress-baskets which her maid had packed for immediate use on board the yacht. A slight smile of amusement flickered over Silva's face as he noticed Vera's amazement.

"Everything has been done to make you comfortable," he said. "It was my own idea to remove your immediate belongings from Waterloo Station and bring them on here. I assure you that it was no difficult job. And now I wish you goodnight, with a thousand pardons for the way in which I have been compelled to treat you. Tomorrow morning----"

Silva paused significantly and bowed himself out of the room. He closed the door gently behind him, and Vera waited till the sound of his footsteps had died away. She tried the door, but, as she had anticipated, it was fastened on the outside. Beyond all question, she was a prisoner. There was nothing but to make the best of it, and

wait on the course of events. There were two bolts on the inside of the door, and, having secured these, Vera felt easier in her mind. She undressed slowly, and more for something to occupy her mind than anything else. She would never be able to sleep again. The idea of sleep seemed to be out of the question. Yet, within ten minutes, Vera had fallen into a deep slumber from which she did not wake until the sun was shining high, and the birds were singing in the trees. The girl rose eagerly and looked out. She could see a wide expanse of green lawn, with big shaded trees here and there. On two sides of the house a common stretched away apparently to the confines of space. How far she was from London Vera could not say. Certainly she had never been here before. She was still admiring the beauty of the landscape when there came a quiet knock at the door, and after the bolts were drawn Silva came in. He was, if possible, even more abjectly apologetic than on the previous evening.

"I am bound to intrude," he said. "You see, this house has only been taken for a time, and the servants are absolutely in ignorance of your presence here. I merely came to show you where you could find all the requisites for your breakfast, and as to the rest, they are in this basket. Here is a spirit lamp, so that you can boil your own water. I am in great hopes that before evening I shall be able to give you what is practically the freedom of the house. Do not think too harshly of me."

Vera made no reply; she was only pleased to have the room to herself again, so that she could think the matter out. She ate her breakfast slowly, for time was beginning to hang on her hands. Any action was better than sitting there doing nothing. It was some time later when she crossed to the window, and looked out. She saw three men busily engaged in some occupation on the lawn. She saw Silva come out and address them, apparently in tones of expostulation, so far as she could judge from his actions. Then one of the men looked up, and Vera could see that he had noticed her. A moment later the man stooped down, and went through some sort of a pantomime, which, in the circumstances, puzzled Vera

extremely. Why should that grave-looking official stoop down and imitate the motions of one who is stroking a dog?

CHAPTER XXXV.

MOTHER AND CHILD.

At any other time the trifling incident would have escaped Vera's attention. But she had nothing else to occupy her mind now. She wondered what it meant. There was no doubt that the official-looking person below was pretending to stroke a dog. There was no jest about it, either, because the other two men took no heed. They appeared to be too absorbed in their occupation. Then, all at once, the truth of it flashed into Vera's mind with a suddenness that left her pale and trembling. It was plain enough. She could not say for certain who it was patting and caressing an imaginary dog, but she was quite certain that there was a message to her behind it. In the first place the man had seen her at the window, of that she felt certain. And he was telling her as plainly as words could speak that her handkerchief had been found, and that Bruno led her friends to the right spot. No doubt, these willing assistants had assumed the guise of land surveyors with a view to getting a better knowledge of the house. Once the excitement of this discovery passed away, Vera's courage came back to her. She now knew that she was safe. She knew that it would not be long before she was restored to her friends again. She deemed it prudent to keep away from the window, and when at length she looked down again, the men were gone.

There was nothing for it but to kill the dreary afternoon as best she could. It seemed to her that she knew every inch of her room, every design and pattern on the wallpaper. She would have given much for a book to while away the time, but, apparently, Silva had overlooked that requirement. As she lay back in an armchair, for the first time, a small, wooden trap in the ceiling attracted her attention. It seemed strange to Vera that she had not noticed it before. A sudden resolution possessed her. She balanced a couple of chairs, one on the other, upon the bed, and made an attempt to lift the trap. There was not the slightest trouble. The square of board gave to her touch at once. Vera thrust her head and shoulders through, and saw that she was immediately under the roof. A sliding glass window overhead lighted up the place, so that Vera could see what sort of a place she had discovered. Instantly she made up her mind what to do. She turned a yachting jersey out of one of the baskets and removed the bodice of her dress. A short serge skirt completed the outfit, and a few moments later Vera had squeezed through the trap, and was walking along the boards which covered the whole area of the house under the roof. What she was now anxious to find was a way down. Here was a large tank which supplied the house with water, and by the side of it a short iron ladder, the end of which was lost in the semi-darkness. But Vera had discovered enough. Doubtless the iron ladder was a permanent structure for the use of workmen in case anything went wrong with the big tank. In all probability the bottom of the iron ladder reached down until it joined the servants' staircase. Vera had seen arrangements of this kind in small country houses before.

At any rate, the knowledge was worth having. Here was a clear avenue of escape. As soon as the house was quiet Vera would be able to steal away, and once outside, she would know exactly what to do. She had no money, but that was a mere detail.

The slow hours crept on till dusk began to fall, and there had been no further sign from Silva. The clocks outside were striking eight

when someone tapped at the door, and in response to Vera's query the voice of Silva spoke:

"We are dining in half an hour," he said. "Will you be so good as to come down? I have unfastened the door."

Vera was trembling with excitement and apprehension. She hastened to change her dress, and a few moments later was hurrying down the stairs. When she reached the hall she found Silva awaiting her. He looked somewhat anxious.

"Your mother is in the drawing-room," he said "I hope you won't mind sitting down to a cold dinner. For motives of prudence we have sent the servants to London for an evening at the theatre. To anyone as intelligent as yourself you will see why we adopted such a course. Will you precede me?"

Vera had nothing to reply. Just for the moment she was incapable of speech. She was wondering whether or not she would awake presently and find it all no more than a dream. The drawing-room was brilliantly lighted. A tall, dark woman stood by the fireplace. Her regular features appeared to be absolutely composed; but agitated though Vera was, she did not fail to notice the restless movements of the hands. Just for a few moments the two looked at one another. Then something like a smile came over the Countess Flavio's face.

"So you are my daughter," she said. "I am afraid I should not have recognised you. Come closer, so that I can look at your face. Thank Heaven, you are not in the least like your father. I cannot be sufficiently thankful for that."

"I have thought about you often," Vera said coldly; "but, surely, if you are my mother, you have a strange way of making yourself known to me. What is the meaning of this outrage? Surely you could have come to Park Lane and asked for me in the ordinary way, without sending this creature of yours-----"

Vera looked round for Silva, but he had discreetly disappeared.

"I am glad that man has had the decency to leave us alone," she went on. "Oh, I have been thinking about this meeting all day. I do not know what to imagine, or what to believe. You say that you are my mother, but how I am to be certain that----"

"I swear it," the Countess said, with a touch of passion in her voice. "You are my daughter beyond the shadow of a doubt. Oh, there is a deal in what you say, but I could not come to Lord Ravenspur's house. There are most urgent reasons. You are wondering, perhaps, why I have not been near you all these years; but I can explain. You remember nothing of your father, for which you can thank your Maker. With the solitary exception of yourself, there was not a creature on earth that he cared for. He was the embodiment of refined cruelty. His greatest delight was in the tortured degradation of others. Ah, you little guess what a veritable hell the two years which followed your birth were. I will tell you all about that some day, and you will be sorry for me. If you had only had my experience you would not wonder why I fled and hid myself when my release came. You would not wonder why I refused to see you, for fear you should be like your father, and remind me of him every hour. I was so near the borderland of insanity then that I should have killed you, if by one look or gesture you had reminded me of the man who had ruined my life. And then, when the lapse of years had restored my strength and vigor again, a longing to see you took possession of me. And when at length I had found you, or, rather, my faithful servant, Silva, had found you for me, there were certain circumstances which prevented my seeking you out at once. I was going to wait my time, but the man whom you call your guardian took such steps that I was bound to act at once. That is why I wrote you that letter last night. That is why you were brought here. And as to Lord Ravenspur, if he is lucky----"

The Countess paused and bit her lips. A horrible suspicion flashed into Vera's mind.

"You must say nothing against him," she cried. "Lord Ravenspur is one of the best and noblest of men."

"Lord Ravenspur is a scoundrel," the Countess cried. "Yes, and before I have finished I am going to prove it to you. Oh, you may look incredulous, but I am a deeply injured woman, and that man is responsible for all my torture."

A crimson wave stained Vera's cheeks. Here was the old suspicion back again with redoubled force. She would have asked the direct question which was trembling on her lips, but the door opened, and Silva came in hurriedly.

"I am loth to intrude," he said, "but it is already half-past eight, and it is imperative that you, madam, should be back in London this evening. There is a train at twenty minutes past nine, which you must not fail to catch."

Without argument, the Countess led the way across to the dining-room, where dinner was laid out. Vera noted with some surprise that there were only covers for two. She had half expected that Silva would sit down to table, instead of which he moved from place to place, waiting upon them, as if he had been accustomed to that kind of thing all his life. A few moments ago he had appeared to be the dictator and leader in everything. Now he suddenly lapsed into a perfectly respectful and exceedingly well-trained servant. It was not that Silva was acting a part. The thing was so perfectly done that Vera saw at once that this was the man's proper position in life. She was too excited to eat or drink, so that, altogether, the meal was little more than a mere formality.

"I am sorry that I can't stay any longer," the Countess said; "I am bound to be in London this evening."

"Then I will come with you," Vera said promptly.

"No," Silva burst out sternly. "The thing is impossible. For the present you stay where you are. In a day or two we will make other arrangements with the servants, and then you can have the freedom of the house. The Countess will tell you that I am right."

"I am afraid so," the Countess said, "unless you will give me your word that you will not communicate with Lord Ravenspur. You must be dead as far as he and his household are concerned."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

"I cannot do it," Vera said quietly. "Forgive me if my words hurt you, but so far I have no evidence to prove that you are anything more than a mere impostor. You claim to be my mother, and perhaps you are. But till tonight I had no mother. For eighteen years Lord Ravenspur has been more than a father to me. If you can give me any satisfactory explanation of this plot against my safety----"

"Oh, I can," the Countess cried. "Two years ago--"

"Be silent!" Silva cried furiously. "I beg your pardon, madam, but I am forgetting myself. I will venture to remind you that your train will not wait."

"That is quite sufficient," Vera said, with dignity. "I will return to my room again. Perhaps the next time I see you, you will have more time for an explanation."

The girl turned and left the room. She walked slowly and sadly up the stairs, and locked herself in. It was not long before she heard the click of the fastening outside. She knew that she was a prisoner once more. It was out of the question to try and realise the meaning of all this extraordinary mystery. There was a certain sense of comfort in the knowledge that she was safe from personal violence. But, beyond this, there was little to light up the dreary prospect. Vera sat there thinking the matter over till the clock struck eleven. Then she glanced up at the ceiling, and stared at the trap-door long and thoughtfully.

She could not hear a sound in the house. Doubtless Silva had retired long ago. Perhaps he was asleep by this time. As to the servants, they were probably not returning till an early hour in the morning. Vera calculated that the house was sufficiently far from London to make a return after the theatre impossible. She was going to risk it. If Silva caught her attempting to escape she could only return to her room again. She changed her dress rapidly. In the pocket of her skirt she placed a box of matches and a night-light, which she found on the dressing-table. To get through the trap was a matter of a moment. With the aid of a match she found the top of the iron ladder, and when she had let herself down she came at length, as she had expected, to the top of the servants' staircase. The house was absolutely quiet, and plunged in darkness. Vera scarcely dared to breathe, till, at length, she found herself in the hall. It was tense and nervous work, and the girl was trembling from head to foot. She hardly dared to touch the bolts. She drew them back a fraction at a time. Then she slid off the chain; the links clicked together with a noise that sounded in the girl's ears almost like a pistol shot. She turned the handle hurriedly. One moment more, and she would be in the garden.

The disappointment was swift and cruel. The door was locked, and the key was not there. Evidently this was no way of escape. After the first feeling of despair Vera shot the bolts back, and put up the chain once more. It was no use trying the back door, for that would

probably be locked, and the key gone. The only possible exit was by way of one of the windows on the ground floor. But here again Vera was doomed to disappointment, for every door was fastened and every key had vanished.

Vera blew out her night-light, and crept softly up the stairs again. She wondered if it were possible to open one of the bedroom windows and leap to the ground. Trembling in every limb she groped her way into one of the rooms, the door of which was open. Once more she ventured to strike a light. The room she was in was furnished like a study. Here was a large table with paper and pens and ink. The walls were lined with books. A strong current of air came in from somewhere; then Vera realised that one of the windows was open. There was a balcony beyond, and on to this she stepped, trying to measure with her eye the distance to the ground. But it was too dark for that. The risk was too great to take. It was like standing on the edge of a precipice. Vera drew back with a shudder. She really had not the courage for such a desperate venture. It would be far better for her to remain where she was until her friends came to her assistance.

With this thought uppermost in her mind Vera turned back to the room again. A sudden gust of air from the open window extinguished the night-light. It was just as well, for almost at the same instant another door opened on the landing, and a shaft of brilliant light shot out. In its rays Vera could see Silva and another man who was a stranger to her. Silva appeared to be in high good spirits. He was chatting gaily to his companion.

"Now you know exactly what I want," he said. "You are to wait by the gate till two o'clock if necessary, and when those people come along, you are to give me the signal. If they don't come by two o'clock, then we can conclude that something has interfered with their plans, and the thing has been postponed."

"Oh, I'll do what you want," the other man said hoarsely.

"I'll see that you do," Silva went on. "I suppose those fools thought they deceived me this morning. It was just as well that I followed them. Well, if they like to come here, they will be pretty sure of a welcome. And now I will just come and let you out, and fasten the door behind you. It will be fun to sit here watching till they are overhead, and then I shall have them in a fine trap. I am looking forward to it with the greatest possible pleasure. Then you had better meet me in London tomorrow, and I will give you the money I promised. Ah, my good Stevens, this is the best week's work you ever did in your life. A few more such jobs and you will be able to retire from your honorable profession."

The man addressed as Stevens smiled sourly. Vera made a note of the name; she also made a note of the man's features. Then, as the two of them went down into the hall, she slipped back to her own room again by means of the iron ladder. Her breath was coming thick and fast, but her courage had returned, and she felt braced up and ready to meet any emergency.

It was quite clear to her what was happening. As far as she herself was concerned, she was practically a prisoner. She could not get away even if she wished to. And now she had no desire to leave. Her instincts had been quite correct. Beyond all question the men on the lawn in the earlier part of the day had been her own friends. The dog had guided them here, and even at that moment they were probably on their way to effect a rescue.

But they had not been quite clever enough for Silva. He had been too suspicious to let an incident like that pass. He had appeared to bow to the inevitable, but, all the same, he had followed his unwelcome visitors, and probably discovered their secret. And the worst of it was, Silva was now quite prepared for the intruders. It was impossible, too, for Vera to warn her friends. She racked her brains for some way of giving them a signal. There was only one desperate step to take, and she decided to risk it. Back once more she went until she came at length to the landing on the first floor.

Her idea was to find out where Silva was hiding. There was a strong smell of cigarette smoke in the house, which appeared to come from the ground floor. There was only one thing for it, and that was to descend to the hall. Under the morning-room door there was just a thin slit of light. It was here that the smell of cigarette smoke was the strongest. It was here, no doubt, that Silva was waiting for the fray. So far as Vera could judge the morning-room was on one side of the house, so that in all probability the light would not be seen, or perhaps there were some heavy curtains or drapery over the window. From his own lips Vera knew something of what Silva's plans were. He was going to wait there till he had his enemies trapped overhead. He probably would not move till the critical moment came.

It was a desperate idea, but there was nothing else for it. Vera crept up to the little sitting-room, and hastily dashed off a few words of warning which she hoped might fall into Walter's hands. She did not doubt for a moment that he would be one of the rescuers. It seemed to her that if she placed the note on the little table with the night-light behind it, and left the door open, it would be bound to attract Walter's attention. Then he would be prepared for the attack from below. There was practically no chance of Silva coming upstairs in the meantime, so that there was no reason why the little plot should fail. It was done at length, and then Vera again crept up the iron ladder to the side of the tank. But she did not return to her room. She knew that she was perfectly safe where she was. And, besides, at any moment her assistance might be of the greatest value. She stood there in the pitchy darkness, the leaden moments creeping on like so many hours.

Her ears were strained to catch the slightest sound; even the trickle of a water-tap sounded like pistol shots. A mouse behind the wainscot appeared to be making noise enough to wake the dead. Then, above the creeping silence, came a quick snap, which was like the breaking of wood. Vera's heart gave a great leap. It seemed to her that the attack was commencing in earnest.

A minute or two later and she fancied she could hear footsteps in the hall. But this she dismissed as mere fancy. She could hear the trees rustling outside as they swayed to a sudden breeze. She hoped the wind would not be strong enough to blow out her night-light. She wished now that she had closed the window. Then she jumped with a nervous start as a door banged like the thud of artillery. She heard a quick, sharp cry, and then the laboured breathing as if two men were locked in a struggle to the death.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND.

Outside in the garden, under cover of the darkness, Ravenspur and his companion waited anxiously for a sign from Walter. The minutes crept slowly on. Still there was nothing to break the silence. A quarter of an hour passed, and at length Ravenspur began to feel decidedly anxious.

"I don't like it," he murmured; "I don't like it a bit. We have an exceedingly cunning scoundrel to deal with, and a bloodthirsty one into the bargain. That man would not stick at anything. I can't understand how it is that Walter doesn't open the door."

Venables made no reply. As a matter of fact, he was not a whit less anxious than Ravenspur. Still the minutes crept on, and still there was no sign from the interior of the house. Then at last came a faint, dull report, which might either have been the closing of a door, or the muffled echo of a pistol shot. Before Venables could reply he

felt something damp and cold against his hand. His nerves were now at high tension. He jumped quickly back, and looked down. A great hound stood there waving his long tail from side to side and looking up into Ravenspur's face as if not altogether sure as to his presence being welcome.

"Call him off," Venables said excitedly. "The brute is dangerous. By Jove, what a fool I am! I thought at first that this was one of our friend Valdo's bodyguard, but I see now that it is your dog, Lord Ravenspur. I suppose he has managed to get away again."

"Oh, it's Bruno right enough," Ravenspur said. "Probably Perks fastened him up insecurely. But he must not be allowed to roam about here. Do you happen to have a dog collar and chain in your pocket, Perks? If so, I'll go and chain him up to one of those trees by the side of the lane."

Perks grinned, and produced the necessary collar and lead. In the course of his business he rarely travelled without one of these, though he looked dubiously at the leather strap, and opined that it was not much good for so great a beast as Bruno.

"I think that will be all right," Lord Ravenspur said. "The dog is well trained, and if I tell him to stop there I am sure he will. At any rate, I don't suppose he will move until we have this business finished. Now, come along, sir."

The great beast trotted along, more or less dejectedly, by his master's side, and a moment or two later he was lying at the foot of a small tree just by the gate leading to the lane. Ravenspur hurried back to his companions. He had hoped by this time that something had happened. He was seriously alarmed to find the house still in darkness, and no sign of Walter anywhere.

"This is very disturbing," he said. "Don't you think one of you had better go inside and see what has become of my nephew? If that man there has done him any violence----"

"I don't think so," Venables interrupted. "After all, the man we are looking for is no fool, and he would most assuredly avoid violence if possible. My dear Lord Ravenspur, you surely did not expect to find Miss Rayne by simply opening the door and going through the house? For my part, I regard this business as only just beginning, and I shall be very much surprised if Miss Rayne is in the house at all. Besides, this man Valdo is certain to be prepared for emergencies of this kind. Suppose he found Walter, and asked him what he was doing there? Suppose he insisted upon showing him all over the house? We will assume that he has proved to Lance that Miss Rayne is not there. He would enjoy that immensely. It would give him far more pleasure than any personal violence. And besides, Walter is quite capable of taking care of himself. Really, we must risk it a little longer. Any undue haste now would ruin our plans."

Sorely against his convictions Ravenspur allowed the point to pass. A quarter of an hour had elapsed now, and there was no sign of Walter. Ravenspur was about to speak again when suddenly from the lane came something in the way of a diversion. A man's voice was raised in terror, a frightened scream for help rent the air. As the cry died away, a deep growl of the dog was heard. Without a moment's hesitation Ravenspur rushed away down the garden and in the direction of the lane.

"There's no time to be lost," he cried. "Come along. Unless I am greatly mistaken, Bruno has got hold of some unfortunate wayfarer on his way home."

It turned out to be exactly as Lord Ravenspur had prophesied. When Perks came up, and turned his lantern on the scene, the outline of a man's body came into view. The unfortunate individual was lying on his back, the great hound was standing over him, his crest erect, his formidable row of teeth glistening in the light. At one word from lord Ravenspur the dog crouched down, and the stranger, trembling with fright in every limb, was dragged to his feet. Something like a chuckle burst from Perks' lips.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, John," he said.

"I thought the brute was going to tear the throat out of me," the stranger said. "I came down here on business----"

"What business?" Venables said curtly. "Here, Perks, hold that light a bit higher up so that I can see the fellow's face. Does he happen to be a friend of yours?"

"We've done a bit of business together," Perks said significantly. "Otherwise, he is not what I would call a friend of mine. He was over at my place early this morning, but I thought he had gone back to town again. What are you looking about here for, John?"

"That's my business," the other said sullenly. "The man who fastened that dog up there so close to the lane ought to have six months. I don't know who he belongs to."

"He belongs to me," Lord Ravenspur explained. "There is one thing I will vouch for--if you hadn't been coming into the garden, that dog would never have touched you. It is no business of mine to ask what you are doing here, for I don't suppose you would tell me if I did. However, it seems to me----"

"No; but I can tell you," Venables put in. "This, Lord Ravenspur, is the man John Stevens who gave evidence at the inquest on Louis Delahay. He was the man who saw Mrs. Delahay with her husband in Fitzjohn Square that morning. He knows Valdo exceedingly well, and no doubt he is down here on the latter's business. If you ask him, he will hardly venture to deny it."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Stevens stammered.

"Oh, yes, you do," Venables went on. "You will say presently that you have never seen me before. You are a treacherous rascal, and evidently you are not in the least to be relied upon. I told you that it would pay you to join me, and I suppose your idea is to get money

from both parties. This is no time to waste on incriminations. This man is a spy of Valdo's, Lord Ravenspur. Evidently he is here to watch our movements. We can't trust him. We can't let him out of our sight. The question is, what are we going to do with him?"

"You just leave me alone or it will be the worse for you," Stevens blustered. "I am not the man----"

Before Stevens could finish his speech he was jerked violently backwards by Perks, and turned over on his face. In less time than it takes to tell, his hands were bound behind his back with a couple of straps, and his feet were fastened together with the aid of some handkerchiefs which Perks borrowed from his companion. The thing was dexterously done, so that Stevens lay there on his back, swearing hotly at Perks, and threatening him with what was likely to happen when his time came.

"Oh, that's all right," Perks said cheerfully; "don't you be a fool, John. It will pay you much better to play the square game with these gentlemen, and as to your threats, why, they don't worry me. You talk about splitting. Why, you dare not go within a mile of a police station. And a nice witness before magistrates you would make. No, my lad; there is no chance of your doing me any harm unless you are prepared to stand in the dock by my side. Now, come along, and we'll get it over."

"What are you going to do with him?" Ravenspur asked.

"Oh, that is an easy one," Perks grinned cheerfully. "We'll just carry him as far as the common, and dump him down on a nice bed of bracken where he can pass the time studying astronomy. I haven't any fear that he can get rid of these bandages. When everything is settled, I'll come back and fetch him. Then I can take him home, and give him some breakfast. He won't bear any malice. That is a very good point about John Stevens: he never bears malice for long. As a matter of fact, he ain't got pluck enough."

Stevens was dumped unceremoniously down upon the bracken, and the little party went back to the house. Lord Ravenspur had forgotten all about Walter for the moment. His mind had reverted to the murder in Fitzjohn Square. He was thinking of Delahay and certain fresh facts which had recently come to light. He allowed Venables to precede him. Then he drew Perks aside for a moment.

"I am going to ask you a question," he said, "and I hope you will answer it straightforwardly. I will see that no harm comes to you. And, indeed, in any case it will be to your advantage to be candid. Have you had any dealings lately with this man Stevens? You know what I mean. Have you bought anything from him for which you paid without asking any questions?"

"Only this very morning, sir," Perks admitted cheerfully. "To tell you the truth, that little thing what you gave me a sovereign for was amongst the lot. And now I have said it. I am a fool to tell you this, but you gave me your word, sir----"

"That is all right," Ravenspur said. "I shall keep it."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN THE HOUSE.

Meanwhile, Walter was standing there in pitch darkness, utterly at a loss what to do next. He had no light to guide him. He had not the remotest idea in which direction the door lay. He took a step or two forward, with outstretched hands, until his fingers touched the wall.

There were so many unfamiliar objects here that it was some little time before he felt his way with his finger-tips to the door. He found it at length, and the knob yielded to his touch. No sooner was he in the corridor than a dazzling flash confused and mystified him. Before he could realise what had happened the light was gone, and a pair of strong, sinewy arms were about his neck. He was taken utterly at a disadvantage. Walter swayed backwards. He fell with a resounding crash on the floor. A million stars danced before his eyes, and then he remembered no more.

When he came to himself again he was lying in an armchair, to which he was fastened by a maze of cords, wound cunningly about him. As his head became clear and less confused, he realised that he was in a kind of library, the walls of which were lined with books. Opposite him Silva was seated, with a placid smile upon his face.

"I think we have met before," he said.

"I have had that advantage," Walter said grimly. "And now you will, perhaps, be good enough to explain what you mean----"

"No," Silva hissed. A sudden anger flamed out of his eyes. "On the other hand, the explanation comes from you. For the time being, at any rate, this house is mine. I have paid for it, and I propose to spend my time quietly here for the next month or two. I am hardly settled down here before you come along in this unceremonious fashion and burgle the place. Why?"

"That you know quite as well as I do," Walter retorted. "Really, you are a man of amazing audacity. Now don't you know that the law punishes people severely for this kind of thing?"

"And what kind of thing do you allude to?"

"Why should you assume ignorance in that way? You know perfectly well what I mean. To my certain knowledge you have made three attempts on the life of Lord Ravenspur, and even that does not seem

to be sufficient. Last night you managed to lure Miss Vera Rayne away from London, and she is in this house at the present moment. That she is detained here against her will I feel certain."

"Oh, indeed," Silva sneered. "Would you like to search the house? If I give you permission to go over the premises, will you be prepared to apologise and go away without further delay?"

A cold chill crept up Walter's spine. The man spoke with such an air of confidence and triumph that Walter began to feel that the mission had failed. Beyond all question, Silva had discovered the plot, and already he had managed to get Vera out of the way. The Italian could not be acting. His air was too assured for that.

"We need not say anything about apologies," Walter said; "but if you can prove to me that Miss Rayne is not in the house, why, then, for the present, at any rate, I will not trouble you."

"That is very good of you," Silva sneered. He rose from his chair and paced up and down the room. "You have seen quite enough of me, sir, to give me credit for not being altogether a fool. That was a very pretty scheme which you put up this morning. And, really, your disguises were quite artistic. I will go so far as to say that, in ordinary circumstances, they would have utterly puzzled me; but, then, I am suspicious by nature. I regard it as more than a coincidence that three strangers should come into my garden the very morning after I had----"

"Abducted Miss Rayne," Walter said, as Silva hesitated. "Why make any bones about it? We know that Miss Rayne came here. We, on our side, are not altogether without intelligence."

"You are worthy antagonists," Silva said, with a sarcastic bow. "We will assume, for the sake of argument, that Miss Rayne was here this morning, though, mark you, I do not admit it. Then, three strangers come and make free with my garden. It is possible, of course, that they are telling the truth, and that they are honest men, devoted to

the interests of their country. But, at the same time, I asked myself a question. Then I followed these gentlemen, and by the time I returned home I had a pretty shrewd idea who they were and what they were after. How my suspicions are justified is proved by your presence here this evening. Did you come alone?"

"That you must discover for yourself," Walter said.

The Italian's features suddenly darkened. He paused so close to Walter that the latter could see the dilation of the pupils of his eyes. He shook with a spasm of fury.

"I have no quarrel with you," he whispered hoarsely. "You are a fine fellow, and I give you all the credit for your courage. But if you persist in bringing yourself within the sphere of danger, then you must take the consequences. Do you suppose for a moment that I am afraid of my own life? Do you suppose that I care what happens when my mission is accomplished? That mission is sacred to me as your good name and religion are sacred to you. A man is to be removed, and when he is out of the way my task is done. There is a proverb amongst you English that it is as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and no man can hang more than once, though he has a dozen murders to his account. Therefore, if you stand in the way, I shall have no hesitation in sweeping you aside. Now go away and trouble me no more. You will never see Miss Rayne again. In a few hours from now she will be in the custody of the proper person to safeguard her interests--her mother."

A retort trembled on Walter's lips, but he restrained himself.

"I am going to give you every opportunity," Silva went on. "I trust to your honour. See here."

He whipped a knife from his pocket, and just for a second Walter's courage was tried high; but the Italian meant no harm. He advanced and cut the cords, so that a moment later Walter was free. It was impossible for the latter to know what was going on in the mind of

his companion. He did not know that a sudden inspiration had come to Silva, and that the Italian had changed his mind. For the first few minutes Valdo had recognised that he stood in a position of considerable peril. Though he had suspected his visitors of the early morning, he was lying to Walter when he declared that he had discovered their identity. It was easy to be wise after the fact, and Silva was taking every advantage of it. In his heart of hearts he really had not expected anything quite so prompt as this. He could now see his danger. If Walter was alone, then so far so good; but if there were others outside the house, then Silva was more or less in a trap. The others might rush in at any moment and hand him over to the police. Once in their hands, his fate was certain. He would be charged with those attempts on the life of Lord Ravenspur. In all probability he would be sentenced to a term of imprisonment, which would result in his death within the walls of a gaol.

But now, as time was going on, and there was no sign of disturbance outside, Silva began to feel that he had only one man to deal with. It would not be a difficult matter to persuade Walter and to prove to him that Vera was no longer in the house, and the cunning Italian knew perfectly well that his skin was safe until Lord Ravenspur and the others were satisfied that the girl had come to no harm.

"We are on even terms again now," Silva went on. "In fact, the odds are in your favour. I am not armed, and you are a stronger man than myself. If you will wait a few moments I will go and get a candle, and then you shall see for yourself that Miss Rayne is not in the house."

"I am sorry," Walter said coldly; "but I should prefer to accompany you. Your word is hardly sufficient."

Silva's eyes flashed, but he said nothing. The silence was getting awkward when, at length, the Italian spoke once more.

"There is a candle outside on the landing," he said. "I will go and fetch it. You will be able to see me all the way there and back. You English are suspicious."

Silva threw the door wide open and strode out into the corridor. As he struck a match and lighted the candle, Walter could dimly see up the next flight of stairs. It was only for a moment, but he distinctly saw the outline of a figure there, and a signal made by the waving of a white arm. It was with difficulty that he repressed a cry. He now knew that the Italian had been lying to him, and that Vera was in the house. When he glanced up again the figure had vanished, and Walter dropped into the easy chair again. It seemed to him that there was something in the signal which bade him to be cautious. Otherwise, what was to prevent Vera coming down the stairs and appealing to Walter for his protection?

Silva was, apparently, a long time getting the candle to burn to his satisfaction. He seemed to be occupied in his task to the exclusion of everything else. But there was a queer smile upon his face, for he had turned in an unfortunate moment, and his quick eye had detected the figure at the top of the stairs. In those few seconds he had made up his mind what to do. When he came back into the library again there was something like a smile on his face. He placed the candle on the table.

"And now, sir," he said almost gaily, "before I proceed to satisfy you that your suspicions are unfounded, permit me to offer you my hospitality. I don't know how you feel, but you look rather shaken, and I must apologise for the way in which I threw you a little time ago; but you see, the average burglar is by no means a welcome guest, and he has no right to expect to be received with open arms. I must insist upon your accompanying me as far as the dining-room, so that I may give you a glass of wine."

Walter hesitated, but only for a moment. He was feeling more shaken and battered than he cared to own. Every now and again

things grew misty before his eyes, a feeling of deadly faintness came upon him. It seemed hours since he entered the house, though little more than ten minutes had elapsed. He knew, too, that he had a great fight before him yet with this wily unscrupulous rascal. Silva must have some great card up his sleeve, or he would not have so gaily denied that Vera was in the house, when all the time she was close at hand. On the whole, Walter decided that he would be all the better for accepting Silva's offer.

"That is very thoughtful of you," he said. "I shall be very glad of a stimulant of some kind."

Once in the dining-room, Silva took a decanter from the sideboard and poured out a glass of port. Walter took it almost greedily and gulped it down at a draught. The wine seemed to soothe him. He sank down in a chair with his hands over his eyes, and, before he knew where he was, he had sunk into a deep sleep. As Silva bent over the unconscious body a hoarse laugh broke from his lips. Then something seemed to sting and burn his cheek. He started back, to see Vera standing before him.

"You scoundrel!" she cried. "You have murdered him!"

In her anger she cast all fear aside. She caught up a heavy decanter from the sideboard and sent it crashing through the window. The whole house rang with her cries for assistance.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HOUND AGAIN.

The clamour ceased. Just for a moment an intense silence followed. Then there came the murmur of voices from without and the crash of splintering wood. Silva cursed himself for his folly. He had been so convinced that Walter had come alone that he had not looked for this. There was no time to be lost. Silva caught Vera as if she had been a feather-weight, and ran with her swiftly up the stairs. It was the work of a moment to unlock a door, thrust her inside, and then fasten the door once more. No sooner was this done than Silva was downstairs again, with his hand on the lock of the back entrance of the house. All this time he could hear the steady splintering of wood as an effort was being made to force one of the drawing-room windows. Silva smiled to himself, for here was the delay which was so essential to him. Once the attackers were in the drawing-room, there would yet be another door to force before they were upon him. He wished with all his heart that he had his revolver with him. But, then, he had not expected so swift a vengeance as this, and he had come down from town without any weapon at all. Still, it was idle to waste time in these regrets, seeing that there was other and stern work before him.

The back entrance of the house was opened at last, and Silva sped back to the dining-room. He half dragged, half carried Walter's unconscious body down the garden path, until he reached a bed of asparagus, where he deposited his burden. Panting with his exertions, he came back again to the house. He wiped the beads of

perspiration from his face. He reached eagerly for a glass of wine, but not from the same decanter from which he had helped Walter. Then he sat down coolly enough to smoke a cigarette till the enemy should put in an appearance. A succession of sounds like pistol shots testified to the attack on the drawing-room door, and a moment later the attacking force burst into the dining-room.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Silva said, with a smile. "But why have you not come in the ordinary way? And now, perhaps, you will be good enough to tell me what you are after?"

"You are wasting our time," Lord Ravenspur said sternly. "We are in search of Miss Vera Rayne, as you know perfectly well. There is not the slightest occasion to lie about it, because I heard her voice just now. Take us to her at once."

"Your lordship's hearing is remarkably good," Silva sneered; "but the scream of one angry woman is so like that of another that I am not prepared to agree with your statement. However, as I appear to be only one to three of you, I suppose you will have your own way and search the house."

"That most assuredly," Venables put in.

"Then I will make no attempt to stop you. I will stay here while you make your search, and perhaps when you have found out that you are mistaken you will apologise to me."

The speaker was perfectly cool and self possessed. With a wave of his hand he intimated that the house was quite at the disposal of the intruders. He sat there with his legs crossed, apparently in the enjoyment of a cigarette; but when once the party had scattered his attitude changed entirely. He darted across the hall and out into the garden. His task was not yet finished. There was a deal to do before he could face his enemies again. He was not a bit downcast, though his plot had partially failed, and though he knew now that before long Vera Rayne would be in the hands of her friends again. All he

thirsted for now was a weapon by which he could take the vengeance for which he had panted all these years. Slowly he dragged the unconscious body of his victim in the direction of the little gate leading to the lane.

Meanwhile, Ravenspur and his companions were scattered over the house. Ravenspur called Vera by name, and, to his great joy and relief, he heard her answering cry from behind one of the bedroom doors. He was not surprised to find the door locked. But that did not much matter now. Ravenspur flung himself against the woodwork, and the door gave way with a crash. Then Vera rushed out and threw herself, sobbing hysterically, into his arms.

"Never mind me," she cried. "Save him!"

"Of whom are you speaking?" Ravenspur asked.

"Why, Walter, of course," Vera went on. "I believe that dreadful man poisoned him. He lured Walter into the dining-room and gave him a glass of wine, and when I got there, he . . . Oh, it was too dreadful! Then I broke the window and screamed for assistance, and you came in."

Ravenspur listened uneasily. In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten all about Walter.

"Try and calm yourself," he said. "So much depends upon you now. Tell me all that happened."

"I came down with that man last night," Vera said. "He brought me a letter from my mother. I wanted to come, and I didn't want to come. I think you will be able to understand my feelings. Then two of them drugged me and carried me down here. It has been a dreadful time. I began to hope this morning, when I saw you in the garden, and Walter gave me a kind of sign. I felt quite sure then that you were not far off, and the knowledge gave me courage. I was locked up in a room at the top of the house, but I managed to

escape through a trap-door, and I was actually on the landing in the darkness when Walter came. He was taken utterly by surprise by this man Silva, and I am sure that he was terribly knocked about and shaken by a fall that he had had. Then I managed to let Walter know that I was in the house. It was a daring thing to do, and Silva must have seen it, though I did not think so at the moment. After that he got Walter downstairs, under pretence of giving him a glass of wine, and then he poisoned him. Oh, I am so distracted that I hardly know what I am speaking about. It is dreadful to think----"

"I am quite sure you are mistaken," Ravenspur said. "This man Silva has no quarrel with Walter, and when we come to get at the truth you will find that there is no greater mischief than a comparatively harmless drug. But where is Walter? Drugged or not, he certainly was not in the dining-room when we got there just now."

"But he must be," Vera protested. "I saw him lying in an armchair, to all appearances dead."

Ravenspur wasted no time in further argument. He went straight back to the dining-room, but no signs of Walter were to be seen. Silva had disappeared also. A strong draught was blowing from the open back door. Ravenspur began to understand pretty well what had taken place. He turned eagerly to Vera.

"Come along with me," he exclaimed. "We are going into the garden. I shall not be in the least surprised to find that Silva has dragged Walter out there. He would have had plenty of time when we were breaking into the house. I understand he is a man of considerable personal strength. Depend upon it, we shall find him somewhere here. Don't be discouraged."

Vera was doing her best to keep from breaking down altogether. There was something peculiarly horrible in the suggestion that her lover's body was lying out there stark and stiff in the darkness. The

fresh breeze blew gratefully on her face. She began to feel a little more like herself again.

"We will get Perks here with his lantern presently," Lord Ravenspur said. "Keep as near to the path as possible. If that fellow happens to have a knife and sees me here, why----"

It was Lord Ravenspur's turn to shudder now, but he kept bravely on. He opened his mouth to speak again, when, suddenly a snarling roar like that of an angry lion broke out, followed by the shrill scream of a human voice, calling in the last extremity of agony. At the dreadful sound, Vera stood still.

"It is Bruno," Lord Ravenspur said hoarsely. "The dog is utterly out of control. He has got hold of that Italian to a certainty. There may be time to save his life yet."

CHAPTER XL.

BROKEN WINGS.

The hoarse yell for assistance rose yet again, this time more feeble than before. It was horrible to stand there in the darkness, looking helplessly around and trying to locate the direction from which the call came. It was horrible, too, to listen to the mumbling and snarling of the dog, just as if he were worrying a bone. Vera clung terrified to Lord Ravenspur. It was in vain that the latter whistled and called to the dog.

"We must have a light here," he said hoarsely. "There is no other way of discovering where the trouble lies. Fool that I was not to think of it before. That man, Perks, has a lantern."

Ravenspur strode back to the house again, and yelled aloud for Perks and his lantern.

"What is wrong?" Venables demanded.

"Oh, you'll see soon enough," Ravenspur said grimly. "For heaven's sake, bring Perks here with the lantern. Unless I am greatly mistaken, our troubles are over as far as the Italian is concerned. Bruno has got hold of him."

They all raced together down the garden path in the direction of the gate. There was no mistaking where the trouble lay, for that mumbling snarl was close at hand now. It seemed to proceed from the foot of a tree. Even Perks, hardened as he was, shuddered and turned pale as the shining disc of the lantern showed a picture so horrible and revolting that Perks staggered back.

"Take the young lady away sir," he said. "This is no place for her. You go back to the house, and leave Lord Ravenspur to carry this poor chap back again. We can't tackle the dog unless there is someone here who knows him."

One glance at the prostrate body, and Venables turned away without further question. Obviously Perks was right, and assuredly it was no place for Vera. Silva lay there on the broad of his back, his arms thrown out, and crouched upon his body was the enormous weight of the dog. The pressure in itself was enough to cause suffocation. But the mischief lay in the terrible gash in the throat where the hound's teeth had met. Bruno crouched there now with evil, bloodshot eyes; a long, deep terrifying growl came steadily and persistently. Perks drew cautiously near.

"Well, if this doesn't beat everything," he said. "Why, there are two bodies. One of them is Mr. Lance."

"That is the cause of all the mischief, as you will see presently," Ravenspur explained. "Never mind about my nephew for a moment. Unless I am greatly mistaken, there is very little the matter with him. But this poor fellow is in a different condition altogether."

As he spoke, Ravenspur stepped forward, and gave Bruno a tremendous blow with a stick which he had pulled from the hedge-side. At the same time he uttered a few words in a harsh tone, and immediately the dog slunk away and crossed the road. His tail was between his legs now, his attitude one of deep dejection.

"I will deal with him presently," Ravenspur went on. "You take the head, and I'll take the feet, and we'll get this poor fellow back to the house again. It is a terrible business altogether, but, mind you, that dog is not very much to blame. As far as I can make out, what has happened is this: Silva managed to drug my nephew, and was getting his body out of the way when he accidentally came in contact with the dog. And if there is one human being more than another to whom Bruno is devoted, that person is my nephew. The dog would scent him at once, and--well, the rest you can imagine."

They conveyed the unconscious body of Silva upstairs, and laid him on a bed. Once Walter had been brought under cover also, there was only one thing to be done, and that was to send for a doctor without delay. It was obvious enough to Ravenspur and his companions that Silva's wounds were exceedingly critical. The throat seemed to be almost bitten away. The man had lost a deal of blood. He lay there absolutely unconscious. His swarthy features were deadly pale. It was impossible to say whether he breathed or not.

"You leave the doctor to me," Perks said. "I know the neighbourhood. I can be back here well within the hour."

The doctor came at length. He shook his head seriously after he had made his examination.

"Oh, of course, recovery is possible," he said; "whilst there is life there is always hope. But if this man pulls round it will be little less than a miracle. How did it happen?"

There was nothing for it but to explain. After all, it would be more or less impossible to avoid the scandal now. But nothing was said as to the real cause of the accident, nor did Ravenspur deem it prudent to ask the doctor's advice as to the best thing to do with Walter.

"Will the poor fellow recover consciousness?" he asked.

"That is quite possible," the doctor replied. "He has a splendid constitution, and possibly may linger on for some days. He can take no direct nourishment, of course. But medical science can do so much now-a-days in the way of injections. I shouldn't be at all surprised if my patient were able to give an account of what has happened. But in all human probability, he will be in his grave before the week is out. And now, will you leave it to me to obtain a nurse, or would you like to send one of your own?"

On the whole, it would be better to leave it to the doctor, Ravenspur thought. An hour or so passed, and the nurse was established in the sick-room. It was now getting towards daylight, but no one thought of rest or sleep. There was nothing for it but to make the best of the extraordinary situation; nothing for it but to remain where they were and explain as well as they could to the servants when they came back in the morning. Vera flung herself down upon a couch in the drawing-room, and closed her eyes. She was tired and worn out, though it seemed to her that sleep was impossible. Nevertheless, when she came to herself again the sunshine was streaming into the room, the birds were singing noisily in the trees outside. On the lawn Ravenspur was walking up and down in grave consultation with Venables. Presently Vera saw Walter join the group. He looked

dreadfully white and haggard; his head was bent, and his step was shaky. A thrill of thankfulness passed over her. She had never hoped to see him walk again. As Vera left the drawing-room and crossed the hall, a maidservant looked at her curiously. Vera advanced with a smile.

"I am afraid we have greatly distressed you," she said. "But perhaps you already know exactly what has happened?"

"His lordship explained to me, miss," the girl said timidly. "I understand that my new master is a friend of yours. You were coming down to see him, and a great dog attacked him."

"Yes; that is so," Vera said, relieved to find that she had to make no prevarication. "And now, if you will be so good, you might show me to a bedroom where I can wash."

The maid seemed to anticipate such a request, for she led the way up the stairs to one of the bedrooms. Vera wondered what the maid would have said could she only have looked into the room at the top of the house under the roof. Feeling much fresher and brighter from the touch of cold water, Vera went down and joined the other two in the garden.

"I am glad to see you looking none the worse for your adventure," Ravenspur said. "I have managed to convince the servants that our appearance here is quite natural. One had to tell a few falsehoods, but in the circumstances it was necessary. Still, servants are suspicious creatures, and I don't want their curiosity to go too far. Already they are wondering where the mistress of the house is, so that there is no help for it, and we must have your mother here without delay. Do you happen to know her London address?"

"No; I don't," Vera replied. "I saw her for an hour last night."

"What, down here?" Walter exclaimed.

"Yes; she came here on purpose to see me. She only stayed a little time, because I understood that it was necessary for her to be back in London again. But I would rather not talk about that if you don't mind. You will quite understand why."

Walter murmured something in reply. Then his face brightened.

"You are quite right, uncle," he said. "It is absolutely necessary that the Countess Flavio should be here at once. We can get her address from Mrs. Delahay. If you like I will go up myself."

"Do you feel equal to it?" Vera asked anxiously.

"Oh, I'm all right now," Walter said, "with the exception of a certain shakiness and a splitting headache. It must have been a pretty severe dose that our interesting friend gave me last night. But I don't think there is any occasion to worry about me."

"Then we will have some breakfast, and get up to London at once," Venables said, in his quick, decisive fashion. "We can leave Lord Ravenspur and Miss Rayne here till we come back. I don't think that Lord Ravenspur has anything to fear from his enemy now."

Breakfast was despatched without delay, and immediately Venables and Walter left for London. The house was now quiet and still, for as yet practically nothing was known as to the cause of Silva's action, and public curiosity still slept.

It was some time after luncheon before Vera had a chance of speaking to the nurse, with an inquiry as to how the patient was getting on. The nurse smiled in reply.

"He is slightly better," she explained; "in fact, he is as well as he is likely to be. He has been conscious for the last half hour. He seems to want something, only I can't understand what it is. We may be able to find out when the doctor comes."

CHAPTER XLI.

A RAY OF LIGHT.

It was no difficult matter to find Mrs. Delahay, who, when the late startling developments were laid before her, made no demur in giving her sister's address. Maria Delahay was looking just as pale and haggard as usual. It seemed impossible to rouse her from the state of apathy into which she had fallen. When the two friends were standing on the steps of the hotel they ran against Inspector Dallas.

"Any fresh news?" Walter asked.

"Well, no," Dallas admitted. "I am simply waiting on events at present. If you could only get Mrs. Delahay to be more candid with me it might save her a deal of unpleasantness in the long run."

"Do you mean that she is in danger?" Venables asked.

"I think you can see that for yourself, sir," Dallas replied. "Naturally, I am hesitating as long as possible----"

"Then hesitate a little longer," Walter said. "Quite by accident Lord Ravenspur has stumbled upon a clue which I think will astonish you when you come to know his story. We are going off now to a place called Cannon Green. We shall probably be back by the last train tonight, and I want you to meet us at Waterloo Station. I think you will be well rewarded for your trouble."

Dallas promised, and, like the wise man he was, asked no questions. The two companions proceeded in a cab to Isleworth Road, where they asked to see the mistress of the house. The maid who answered the door was somewhat reticent, but she admitted that her mistress was at home, whereupon Walter and his companion entered without further ceremony. Perhaps their manner impressed the maid, for she came back a moment later saying that her mistress would see the visitors. The Countess entered the drawing-room and glanced with cold displeasure at the intruders.

"What can you possibly want with me?" she demanded.

"Perhaps I had better explain," Walter began. "My name is Lance, and I am a nephew of Lord Ravenspur. Lord Ravenspur has a ward who is called Miss Vera Rayne. In other words, I understand that Miss Rayne is really your daughter."

The Countess's cold face flushed slightly.

"I am not prepared to contradict you," she said.

"My dear madam," Walter said, "this is no time for diplomacy. Rightly or wrongly, my uncle came to Italy eighteen years ago and kidnapped your daughter. You see, I am quite candid, and I hope you will be good enough to be as candid in your replies. My uncle will himself explain why he took this bold step, but I understand that your late husband did not consider you a desirable parent for a child, and he made my uncle promise to remove the child from your influence. Into the morality of that question I am not disposed to go. For nearly eighteen years nothing happened, and my uncle began to regard Vera quite as his own child. Then the truth came out, and some emissary of yours came to England, prepared to go to any length to regain possession of your daughter. I need not say I am alluding to the man called Silva, also known to many people as Valdo, the flying man. This servant of yours made no fewer than three attacks on my uncle's life, none of which, fortunately, was

successful. And then, I understand, you came on the scene. I believe you were instrumental in luring your daughter from Lady Kingmar's the night before last, and getting her imprisoned at a place called Cannon Green. One moment, please. I would not deny it, if I were you----"

"I am not going to deny it," the Countess said in a hard, dry voice. "There is no occasion to."

"Ah, well, that being so, we shall get on all the better. Directly we discovered what had happened we set off in pursuit, fortunately aided by a bloodhound of my uncle's, who had followed us to Lady Ringmar's from Park Lane. To make a long story short, we broke into the house, and Miss Rayne is once more under the protection of Lord Ravenspur. But your man, Silva, does not lack resource, and he managed to drug me and drag me out into the garden. Unfortunately for him, the dog was prowling about, and, knowing me and recognising my peril, he made a furious attack upon Silva, with the result that your friend lies in a critical condition and is not expected to live. After what I have told you, I think you will see the necessity of coming down to Cannon Green with us without delay."

During this recital the Countess made no sign. She listened with a calmness and unconcern which moved Walter to anger. After all, whatever Silva's faults might have been, his devotion to his mistress left nothing to be desired. The Countess sat thoughtfully for a few moments before she replied.

"I think I see what you mean," she said presently. "You want as far as possible to avoid a scandal?"

"Well, naturally," Walter said warmly. "In your daughter's interests it is your duty to assist us. If you fall in line with this idea, the general public will be none the wiser. And when you come to know what manner of man it is that your servant has been attempting to murder in absolutely cold blood----"

"Oh, I know what manner of man he is," the Countess cried. "He is the same manner of man as my husband. And a more cold-blooded scoundrel never drew the breath of life. But make no mistake about one thing--I was a party to no violence. All I wanted was to have my child back again, and I hoped that when once this was done, I should be able to induce Silva to forego the vengeance which to him was a part of his religion. You will understand presently why I have appeared to act so strangely. Not but what Lord Ravenspur deserved whatever fate he got at the hands of Silva. Still, we are wasting time in talking like this. I am ready to come with you to Cannon Green at once, more especially because you are right in saying that it is my duty to try and avoid anything in the shape of a scandal. If you will give me five minutes and call a cab, I am absolutely at your service."

It was a little before five when this strangely assorted group reached Cannon Green. The doctor was just coming away, and Walter asked eagerly after the patient.

"Oh, practically he is no better," the medical man explained. "I mean, he isn't going to get well. Just for the present he is buoyed up with a strong stimulant, and is in full possession of his faculties. He seems to want something, but I can't make out what it is. We gave him a sheet of paper and a pencil just now, and he scribbled a word or two, which, being Italian, we could not make out."

"I think I know what he wants," Walter said. "May I suggest, Countess, that you go up to the poor man's bedroom at once?"

Silva's face lighted up as his eyes fell upon his mistress. He pointed to the bandages about his throat. His lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"I know exactly what has happened," the Countess said. "No, pray don't distress yourself. You must not try your strength. You will never get better if you exert yourself."

A melancholy smile came over Silva's face. The expression of his eyes told as plainly as possible that he had no delusions on the score of his recovery. Then he went through the motion of writing with an imaginary pencil upon an invisible paper. Countess Flavio turned impulsively to the nurse.

"Is it quite safe?" she asked. "I don't think the poor fellow will rest till he makes me understand; and you see, being Italian myself, anything he may write----"

"I think it will be a very good thing," the nurse replied.

She came to the bedside with a sheet of paper and a pencil, which she placed in Silva's hand. His unsteady fingers began to trace certain signs on the paper. The marks were feeble and straggling enough, but a little care on the part of the Countess enabled her to make out what the characters represented.

"It is quite plain to me now," she said, looking down into Silva's eager face. "You want me to find the diary, do you not? You mean the Count's diary, which was not produced at the trial?"

Silva nodded feebly. Evidently he was fast lapsing into unconsciousness again. But with an effort he managed to concentrate his mind upon what the Countess was saying.

"The diary is locked up in a little desk in your bedroom," the Countess went on. "I am to find it and give it to Mr. Walter Lance to read. My good Silva, this is most extraordinary! What possible interest could Mr. Lance take in that diary? Are you quite sure that I have not made a mistake?"

Again Silva opened his eyes and nodded almost vigorously.

"Very well," the Countess said reluctantly. "I see you are in earnest. I will get the diary at once, and Mr. Lance shall have it without delay. If there is anything more----"

It was idle to speak to Silva any longer. Just for an instant a smile flickered over his face, and then he was completely lost to the world and his surroundings. Puzzled and mystified, the Countess crept from the room. Silva had made this request on what was practically his dying bed, and he must be obeyed. What good it would do at this moment the Countess was quite at a loss to see. She found the little desk presently and broke it open. Inside lay a small parchment-covered volume with gilt lettering on the outside. With this in her hand the Countess Flavio walked out on to the lawn where Walter was strolling up and down and accosted him.

"This is for you," she said. "I don't know why, but Silva told me to deliver it into your hands, and perhaps when you have read it you will have a different opinion of Vera's mother."

CHAPTER XLII.

RUN TO EARTH.

Without waiting for a reply the Countess turned away, and went back into the house again. In the drawing-room Vera was seated, talking earnestly to Lord Ravenspur. There was an awkward pause as the Countess Flavio entered the room. Then Vera rose with a crimson face, and came in the direction of her mother.

"I suppose there is no occasion," she said, "to introduce you to one another, though it is so many years ago--"

"I have never seen Lord Ravenspur before in my life," the Countess said coldly, "and I am quite sure that he has never seen me, either. We are absolute strangers."

"But I thought," Vera stammered, "that Lord Ravenspur and yourself---- Oh, I don't know what I thought."

The girl paused abruptly, conscious that she was saying too much. For some time past she had been hugging what appeared to be a shameful secret to her breast. Her face paled with remorse now when she thought how she had misjudged these two people. But the embarrassment was not all Vera's, for Ravenspur was looking unhappy and uncomfortable. Only the Countess appeared to retain her cold self-possession. For some time no one spoke.

"Sooner or later, I suppose, I shall be entitled to an explanation," the Countess said at length. "It is now eighteen years since I was cruelly deprived of my child. It is just possible that Lord Ravenspur can explain his extraordinary conduct."

"I think I might manage to do that if we were alone," Ravenspur replied. "But, after all, you are Vera's mother, and what I have to say I could not utter in the child's hearing. Oh, I know that sounds like a cowardly remark, but my conscience tells me that I am only doing what is right."

Vera rose as if to go, but Ravenspur stretched out a hand and detained her. There was a determined look in his eyes.

"Not yet," he said; "there will be time for that later on. After dinner, if the Countess will give me the honour of an interview, I may be able to satisfy her that I am not the scoundrel she takes me to be. There are always two sides to a question."

"Yes, where the man is concerned," the Countess said coldly. "Let us hope in this case the same remark will apply to the woman--that is, if you are prepared to admit that I *am* a woman."

Ravenspur murmured something in reply. It seemed to him only right that mother and daughter should be alone. And, besides, he wanted to think the situation over. He had formed his own opinion of the Countess. He had implicitly believed all that his late friend Flavio had told him about his wife. He had anticipated something quite different to this. The woman was cold and self-contained and haughty, and yet Ravenspur could see nothing in her face to which he could take exception. Flavio had spoken of her as a fiend, a creature who had no title to the name of woman. His pictures had been glowing and full of colour. And now, before a word had been spoken, Ravenspur began to have his doubts. And how like the Countess was to Mrs. Delahay. As Ravenspur paced up and down the lawn, he began to see a little light in dark places. He was still turning the matter over in his mind when Walter and Venables came out of the house.

"Where are you going now?" Ravenspur asked. "What is that thing that you have in your hand?"

"It is a new collar and dog-chain," Walter explained. "It suddenly occurred to Venables just now that we had seen nothing of Bruno all day. I have been whistling for him for half an hour, and though I am almost certain he is hiding somewhere in the bracken on the common, I can't get him to answer the call."

"Probably afraid of a good thrashing for his work last night," Ravenspur murmured. "But you must manage to get hold of him, Walter. It will never do for a big hound like that to be roaming about the common. Those dogs are all right when they are well fed. But if the beast gets really hungry I wouldn't answer for the consequences. Whatever else happens, or whatever is neglected, you must find Bruno, and that at once."

Walter and Venables went off in the direction of the common, and for the next couple of hours sought everywhere for the dog. It seemed to them they could hear him every now and then. Presently

Venables caught sight of his lean, dark-brown side as he crouched behind a great thicket of gorse. Walter called softly, and held a biscuit out in the direction of the bush. Then slowly, with his body bent to the ground and his head hung down, the great beast came, and Walter slipped the collar round his neck. He had hardly congratulated himself upon his success when a hollow groan close by attracted his attention. He turned eagerly to Venables. "Oh, yes, I heard it," the latter said with a smile. "Can't you guess who it is? I declare I had absolutely forgotten all about him. Unless I am greatly mistaken, that is our friend Stevens whom Perks tied up so neatly and artistically last night."

It was precisely as Venables had said. Stevens lay there groaning and shivering, quite helpless and almost unable to move. Even after his bonds were cut away it was some time before he had strength to rise. His teeth were chattering with the cold, although the day was quite a warm one. He was a mass of cramps and aches from head to feet. When once his blood began to stir again, he turned an angry face in the direction of his rescuers.

"Oh, you need not laugh," he said. "It is no laughing matter. I'll have the law against you for this, see if I don't."

"We will talk about that presently," said Venables coolly. "In the meantime, you had better come as far as the house and have something to eat. And you will be wise if you say nothing, or know nothing, of what happened last night. Your accomplice, Silva, lies in bed at the point of death, so you have nothing to fear from him. If you had gone straight with us, you would not have fallen into this sorry plight. Have you got any money?"

"I spent it all in coming down last night," Stevens said.

"Oh, well, we'll see you back to town again," Walter replied. "Meanwhile, we have other work to do. We will take you to the

house and see that you are properly fed, and then you can kill time as best you can for the evening. You can return by the last train."

It was dark before Stevens reached the station with the few shillings in his pocket necessary to get him back to London again. As he stepped into a third-class carriage he did not realise that Walter and Venables were taking their places at the end of the train. It was just the same at Waterloo Station, where Stevens got out, and a moment later he was being followed by the pair, who had been joined now by Dallas.

"What is the game, gentlemen?" the Inspector asked. "Surely that man is the witness Stevens who gave such startling evidence at the Delahay inquest?"

"That is right enough," Walter said. "We are going to follow him and see where he goes to. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he can give you a great deal more information than he did at the inquest. And now, perhaps, I had better tell you of the discovery which Lord Ravenspur made last night. But, before doing that, I want to know if you missed anything from Mr. Delahay's studio. For instance, did you find a watch on the body?"

"There was no watch," Dallas said, after a moment's thought. "We found a purse in his trousers pocket with some gold in it, but nothing besides. Was he wearing a watch?"

"I am sure if you ask Mrs. Delahay she will tell you so," Walter replied. "He was wearing a watch and chain, and on the chain was an ornament which my uncle had given him. My uncle bought that ornament yesterday from a man who is obviously a receiver of stolen goods, and that ornament was sold to the shady individual in question by John Stevens. In proof of what I say, here it is."

Dallas' eyes gleamed as he took the trinket in his hand. He said no more as he walked thoughtfully by the side of his companions, till at length Stevens turned into a shady street, where he entered a dingy

public-house. Without the slightest hesitation Dallas followed. He had quite made up his mind what he was going to do. For the time being, at any rate, the public-house was empty. Stevens was sitting in an armchair behind a partition with a glass in his hand. He started and his face changed colour as his eyes fell upon Dallas. The Inspector's manner was genial enough, but there was a grimness on his face that Stevens did not relish.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he stammered.

"Well, unless I am greatly mistaken, you can do a great deal," Dallas replied. "That matter of the Delahay murder, you know. You remember what you told us at the inquest?"

"Yes, and every word of it was true," Stevens said tremulously. "If it is the last word I ever say, it was true."

"And I believe it," Dallas went on. "The only fault I find in your evidence is that you did not tell us enough. Why didn't you finish your story while you were about it?"

Stevens looked stealthily at his tormentor. He gulped his glass of liquor down hastily, for there was a queer dryness at the back of his throat that almost choked him.

"Come," Dallas said, with a quick and sudden sternness. "Speak out, or it will be all the worse for you. Tell us who it was who murdered Mr. Louis Delahay?"

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE WHOLE TRUTH.

Stevens stared helplessly at the speaker. He tried to speak, but his jaw dropped. He mumbled something that was quite impossible to understand. But, at the same time, he recognised the peril of his position. There was a ghastly green tinge on his face, his hand trembled. Dallas regarded him pleasantly enough. There was nothing harsh or stern in the detective's manner. His quiet air of assured triumph struck a greater terror into Stevens than any sternness would have done. The shabby little man wriggled about in his seat looking very much like a rat behind the bars of a cage.

"Take your time," Dallas said quietly. "You will find in the long run that it will pay you a great deal better to tell the truth."

"I have always told the truth," Stevens stammered.

"Up to a certain point, yes. But you didn't go far enough. For instance, you might have told the coroner that you saw Mr. Delahay's lady visitor a second time. You might have gone further, and told the court that Mr. Delahay had other visitors long after his first one had gone. You see, that would have helped the police a good deal, and it would have effectually cleared an innocent lady whom we suspected of having a hand in the murder. Now who was it that called at the studio in the early hours of the morning?"

"How should I know?" Stevens said sullenly.

"That, my good man, is for you to say. But you need not answer unless you like. It so happens that you are waiting here for the individual in question this very moment."

The greenish hue crept over Stevens' face again. He could only stare at the speaker with open-mouthed astonishment. Dallas' manner grew a little more stern and curt as he rose from his seat.

"You will stay where you are," he said, "and with these two gentlemen I will go into the next box. I think I can trust you not to betray our presence there. In fact, your safety, to a large extent, depends upon your actions in the next hour or so."

"I have done nothing," Stevens burst out. "I swear I have done nothing. I had no hand in it at all."

"That I quite believe," Dallas replied. "It was afterwards that you began to see your way to make some money out of it. And now let me tell you something. You don't deserve any consideration at my hands, but I am prepared to spare you as far as possible. Oh, I know you will play me false at the first chance. But let me tell you, I know all about your visit to your friend, Perks, of Cannon Green. I know how you disposed of certain stolen goods which, until the night of the murder, were in the possession of Mr. Louis Delahay. After that, I don't think you will deem it prudent to try any of your nonsense with me."

Dallas turned away, and, with his two companions, entered the next box. It was gloomy enough there, so that their presence was not likely to be detected by anyone who came in. Walter turned eagerly to Dallas. His curiosity was aroused now. He wanted to know how it was that the inspector knew so much.

"It was mere conjecture on my part," Dallas said. "Of course, what you told me gave me a great deal of assistance; but I did not begin to see my way quite clearly until we followed Stevens here. The landlord of this public-house has never got into trouble as yet. But we know perfectly well that a good deal of stolen property is disposed of, and when I saw Stevens turn in here, things became plain enough. He was coming to meet his accomplice, and hand over his share of the money which he had obtained from Perks. Before half an hour is over, the real culprit will be here. Please stop talking directly anybody comes in. It will spoil everything if our presence here becomes known."

It was precisely as Dallas had said. Some twenty minutes later a man lounged into the bar and called for something to drink. He seemed to suspect nothing, he appeared to be perfectly at his ease. He whistled some music-hall air merrily. The man was fairly well-dressed. A gaudy cap on the back of his head disclosed a plaster of greasy curls on a peculiarly low and retreating forehead. The stranger might have been a street hawker in his best clothes. Certainly he did not suggest a professional criminal.

He swallowed his drink and strolled towards the fireplace without noticing the three occupants in the recesses of the box. Then he caught sight of Stevens, and took a seat by his side. The conversation was conducted in whispers, but it was possible for the listeners to hear most of what was taking place.

"Well, did you manage it all right?" the newcomer asked.

"Don't trouble about that," Stevens muttered. "But I didn't get half as much as you thought I should. Forty pounds was the price my man offered, and he wouldn't give another penny."

The newcomer growled something incoherent. Then there was a chink of money stealthily passed, followed by a volley of oaths from Stevens' companion.

"The game isn't worth playing," he muttered. "Fancy, twenty quid for a job like that, and the chance of hanging into the bargain. I wish I had never gone there, John. I wish I had never met you that night, when you told me all about the house in Fitzjohn Square. I wake up in the night in a bath of cold sweat when I think of it. Fancy going into what you take to be an empty house, and finding a dead body staring up in your face from the floor! Yes, I *took* his watch and chain all right, but I don't know where I got the pluck from. Took the risk of being strung up for it, bli'me! And me ready to get married, and the date fixed and all! Lord, if I could only see my way to get clear of it all! Twenty quid against a man's life! You go and try it

yourself, and see what it's like, my ancient pal. When I recollect as it was you as told me of the broken catch on the studio window, I could bash your face in, I could. I can't forget it. I have tried drink, but that is no use. You can stave it off for an hour or two, and then it comes back worse than ever. And all for the sake of twenty quid!"

Stevens made no reply. He sat there quivering from head to foot, sick with suspense and anxiety, wondering in his mind when Dallas was going to strike. At any other time the ghastly colour of his face would have attracted the attention of his companion, but the other man was occupied with his own thoughts. He was staring moodily into the fireplace.

"Don't talk about it," Stevens managed to say at length. "If you had told me about it at the time, I never should have touched that stuff. But I had got it in my pocket, and I had given my word before ever I had heard of the murder. And how was I to know that there was a chance of Mr. Delahay coming back? If anything happens you will say as much for me, won't you?"

Stevens asked the question with trembling eagerness. He made his request more with a view to impressing Dallas than anything else. But the culprit by his side, apparently, had no idea of the drift of the question, or why it was asked.

"Oh, you have nothing to fear," he said moodily. "At least, it is all right as long as that stuff isn't traced. But what is the use of sitting here jawing like this? Let us go to a music-hall or theatre or something of that kind--anything to get away from one's thoughts. Every now and again----"

The speaker rose to his feet, and Stevens dragged his trembling limbs from the settee. At the same moment, Dallas appeared upon the scene and touched the stranger lightly on the shoulder.

"I hope you know who I am," he said.

The other man heaved a sigh, which sounded almost like relief. Just for a moment all the blood left his face. Then he recovered himself and looked at Dallas steadily.

"Dallas, of Scotland Yard," he said. "Oh, I know you well enough, sir, and I expect you know me."

"Name of Cooney," Dallas said briskly. "Jim Cooney. I arrest you for burglary at the residence of Mr. Louis Delahay, in Fitzjohn Square."

"Yes, that's right enough," Cooney said. "I am not going to complain. Upon my word, I am glad it is over. If you just let me have a cigarette and another drink I'll tell you all about it; and a nice sort of pal you are, Stevens. Oh, I'd give something to have you for five minutes to myself. You sneaking rat!"

"I couldn't help myself," Stevens whined. "Upon my word, I couldn't. Besides, what does it matter? Inspector Dallas knows all about it. He even knew you were coming here tonight, though I swear he never had a single hint from me. Isn't that so, Inspector? Am I telling the truth, or am I a liar?"

"It is perfectly true, Cooney," Dallas explained. "I followed Stevens here, knowing quite well that he was waiting for you."

The assurance seemed to be sufficient, for Cooney asked no further questions. Nor was it for Dallas to explain that, till a few moments ago, he had no idea of the real identity of the man whom Stevens had come to meet. Cooney took a long whiff of his cigarette and pitched the end of it into the fireplace.

"I am quite ready for you now," he said, "and I'll tell you all about it if you like. Oh, I know everything I say will be taken down in evidence against me; but it is little I mind that. I plundered the dead body of Mr. Delahay, all right. He was dead when I got there, and if I didn't tell you so, you overheard enough to jug me half a dozen times. Don't look at me like that Mr. Dallas, sir. Don't think as I had

any hand in the murder, sir. May I die if I ain't as innocent of that as a kid."

"Better not say too much," Dallas suggested. "Really, I am not curious to hear. And now, come along. You can have a cab if you like. Perhaps you may come out of this better than you expect--if you are only candid."

"Don't be in a hurry," Cooney pleaded. "I'll tell you everything, sir, I will--straight--everything from start to finish. Sit down and listen to me; and you need not be afraid that I shall try and escape. I don't want to."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE STORY OF A CRIME.

Dallas shrugged his shoulders indifferently. Truth to tell he was both annoyed and disappointed. He had looked forward with every assurance to laying his hand on the actual culprit in the person of Cooney. As it was now, the whole thing looked like beginning all over again. A suspicion of the real truth was dawning on his mind. "It was like this," Cooney said, in a harsh, strained voice. "I have been pretty short of a job for some time, and I promised to pay for a lot of furniture I bought for my house by a given time. I had the stuff on the hire-purchase system, and I knew precious well what would happen if I did not keep the instalments up. I had only a day or two to spare, and I was getting pretty anxious. That same evening I met Stevens in a public house. I hadn't seen him for some time, and, naturally enough, I asked him what he had been doing. Then he told me that on behalf of a party, whose name he didn't mention, he had been shadowing a certain house in Fitzjohn Square. I wasn't particularly interested until he let out that he could tell me a good deal about the houses there, and how some of them would be easy work for the likes of a chap such as me, for instance. Then I asks a few questions, and hears all about Mr. Delahay's studio. Thinks I to myself, here's a bit of luck for you, Jim Cooney. I had all the information I wanted. The next night I goes round and has a look at the studio. The thing was as easy as eating your dinner. I waited till it got pretty late, and then I got into the house from the back. When I did get there, I was rather alarmed to see a light in the studio. I

crept along to the door, and looked in. You can imagine my surprise when I saw a gentleman painting there. When I looked at him again I had no difficulty in recognising Lord Ravenspur.

"What he was doing there, I don't know. But seeing it wasn't his own house, I reckoned he wasn't likely to stay long, so I just sat down to wait patiently for such a time as I could have the place to myself. It wasn't more than an hour before I heard the door open, and two other people came in. They were a lady and a gentleman, but who the lady was I don't know from Adam. The gentleman, as you will guess, was Mr. Delahay himself. I suppose the lady was really Mrs. Delahay, too; I mean, the woman who is suspected of the murder. But I am getting a bit away from the point. I had hardly time to hide myself behind a recess with a curtain in front of it before the newcomers came into the hall and began to talk. They were conversing more or less in whispers, so that I could not follow very well, but I could see that they were annoyed to find Lord Ravenspur there, and they were casting about for some means of getting rid of him. Presently the lady said something about the light and the cable, and the gentleman seemed to fall in with her suggestion. Anyway, I saw him take a knife from his pocket, and go down into the basement. A moment later the whole place was plunged in darkness----"

"You mean that the cable was cut?" Dallas asked. "Well, I am glad that mystery is cleared up. I am bound to tell you, gentlemen, that that cut cable has caused me no end of trouble. It started me on a dozen, more or less impossible, theories. I see exactly what happened now. Mr. Delahay and his companion doubtless thought that if they cut off the light, they would get rid of Lord Ravenspur."

"That is exactly what they did," Cooney resumed. "I heard his lordship fussing about, and trying the electric switches, but he gave it up as a bad job, and after a bit left the house. Mr. Delahay appeared presently from somewhere, with a lamp, which he carried into the studio, and the lady followed him. I was close enough at

hand to see what took place. The lady had come, evidently for some valuable jewelry, for Mr. Delahay produced a case from a safe, and handed it over to her. My word, but those stones did sparkle! It seemed to me that I was in luck that night. My game obviously was to take no further heed of the studio, but to follow the lady as soon as she left the house. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and there wasn't a soul about. In my mind's eye I saw those stones already in my pocket. But, unfortunately for me, Mr. Delahay walked with his visitor as far as the front gate, and stood looking up the road until the lady was safe in a hansom. It was as much as I could do to get back to the house again without being discovered, but I managed it all right. There were several valuable articles I had marked down, and directly Mr. Delahay was back in the studio I began to gather them together. I dropped one trinket, which tinkled on the floor, and my heart was in my mouth. I thought that the sound didn't reach the ears of Mr. Delahay. But I was mistaken. A minute or two later I heard him coming, and I bolted through the window into the garden. I waited there perhaps for an hour before it seemed safe for me to go back, and then I went. I turned on the light. . . . My heart was fair in my mouth. Then I looked down at the floor. There lay Mr. Delahay as dead as a rabbit. I believe I howled for a moment, I was taken to! But there he lay, and there was his watch-chain a-shining in the light, and then it comes into my head that, if I'd got pluck enough, here was a way to pay for them sticks of furniture of mine. It was hard work, but I managed to screw myself up to it at last. After all said and done, I'd only come here to take what I could get, and it wasn't me that knifed the poor gentleman. Besides, he might have died a natural death for all I knew. There was no sign of blood about, and nothing that suggested violence. All the same, I couldn't go through it again if you offered me ten thousand of the best."

Cooney paused and shuddered. Great beads of perspiration poured down his face. Then he resumed once more.

"Well, he was dead, and there was an end of it. Just for the moment I wasn't thinking about much besides my little happy home. I pocketed all the valuables I could lay my hands upon, and carried them away. You may say that that was a mad thing to do, but after I saw Mr. Delahay lying dead at my feet, it seemed to me as if he wasn't likely to miss 'em. Oh, I know as I stand in what the papers call a serious position. But that's the gospel truth, and I can't tell you any more. It seems to me I have said enough. And now, if you will call a cab, sir, I am ready for you."

A cab was called, and Dallas drove off in the direction of Bow Street with his prisoner. He stopped just a moment to exchange a few words with Lance and Venables.

"There is no reason why Mrs. Delahay should not know this just yet?" Walter asked. "You may be sure that she feels her position keenly. Would there be any objection to getting her to accompany us as far as Cannon Green tonight? You will understand why."

"None at all," Dallas said. "I'll send a message to the man who is watching outside the Grand Hotel, and let him know that his presence there is needed no longer. All the same, we have still got to find the culprit. It isn't Cooney. He told us the truth, I'm certain. The culprit is at Cannon Green! What a fool I've been!"

Mrs. Delahay received her visitors in a dull, apathetic way, which had never left her since the night of the tragedy. But her face cleared, and her manner became more soft and gentle as she listened to the story which Walter had to tell. She dropped into a chair, and for some moments the tears ran unrestrainedly down her cheeks. She wiped her eyes presently. There was something like a smile on her lips as she turned to Walter.

"I believe those tears saved my reason," she said. "I have not been able to cry. I have not been able to feel the last few days. The death of my husband was bad enough. The knowledge that I was

suspected of his murder was worse, but the feeling that my own sister possibly had a hand in the tragedy was worse than all the rest. There are one or two matters to be explained yet, but the great truth is growing plain, and I feel like a living being once more. Oh, yes; I will come down to Cannon Green with you; I am looking forward to it with something like pleasure. I know that when I have seen my sister everything will be cleared up."

It was a different woman who came down from her room half an hour later, ready for the journey. She looked sad and pathetic enough in her deep mourning. The trouble still brooded in her eyes, but the look of stony despair was no longer there. They came at length to the house on the common. The windows were lighted up, the hall looked comfortable and cheery.

In the drawing-room were the Countess Flavio and Vera. They rose as Mrs. Delahay entered.

"I have brought your sister," Walter explained briefly. "She has much to say to you. Perhaps I had better leave you alone."

CHAPTER XLV.

COUNT FLAVIO'S DIARY.

It was getting exceedingly late now, but the two sisters Descarti, together with Vera, were still in the drawing-room. Nobody cared to disturb them. It was felt that they would have much to say to one another. And no doubt, all they had to tell would be disclosed when

the proper time came. Valdo had not recovered consciousness again. He lay there overhead, with a vigilant-eyed nurse watching him. Venables had not come down with Mrs. Delahay and Walter. He had excused himself on the plea of business, and on the understanding that he would visit Cannon Green the following day. In the dining-room for the last hour or two Walter had been seated, deeply engrossed in the slim, parchment-covered volume which had been sent him by Countess Flavio at the urgent request of her dying servant.

Time was going on, and still Walter did not look up from the book. It was long past two before he finished. Then with a firm step and a determined air he went up to the little library where Lord Ravenspur was busy writing letters. The latter looked up, and demanded to know what his nephew wanted.

"I want you to look at this," Walter said quietly. "It is a diary written by your late friend Count Flavio, whose handwriting you will, of course, recognise. The diary came into the hands of Silva after his master's death. Now Silva told me some time ago--in fact, during that memorable interview in your studio--that he had in his possession documentary evidence which would prove that his mistress was an injured woman, and his master a scoundrel of the deepest dye. When I asked him why he did not produce this book at the trial, he shrugged his shoulders, and said that it would have been useless. Public opinion against the Countess ran so high that nobody would have believed that it was anything but a forgery. But that will be for you to judge. Before we go any further, I want your assurance that this is your dead friend's own handwriting."

Lord Ravenspur turned over the leaves of the manuscript, more or less languidly. One leaf after another he fluttered over; then he handed the book back to Walter again.

"I am not going to contest the point," he said. "Beyond question, this is my unfortunate friend's handwriting; though the letters are

quite plain, the writing could not be easily forged. Indeed, to forge such an amount as that would be the work of half a lifetime. But what do you want me to do?"

Walter signified that he would like his uncle to read the whole of the volume, but Lord Ravenspur shook his head.

"I am afraid I cannot," he said. "I can speak Italian fairly enough, as you know, but that is merely colloquial, and I had never time really to master the language. But, seeing that you spent three years of your life there, don't you think that you had better read it out to me. I suppose it is interesting?"

"I never read anything that fascinated me more," Walter said. "Mind you, this is the secret diary of Count Flavio. He had no idea that anybody would ever read it. I have gone through the volume from start to finish, and I am forced to the conclusion that your friend was the poisonous scoundrel that Silva declares him to be. I tell you, if this book was published, it would cause a great sensation from one end of Europe to the other. It is the work of a brilliant man with a fine style and an imaginative mind--the history of an attempt to deprive a woman of her will, and of her reason. For the three years during which the Count and Countess Flavio lived together the woman's life was one long, incessant torture. Mind you, there was no actual violence, but the tortures were exquisite and cruel all the same. And here we have them in the Count's own words. It is absolutely necessary that you should listen to some extracts from this amazing work."

"Go on," Ravenspur said quietly; "I am all attention."

Walter bent back the book, and began to read:

"February 17th, 1887. What man is there who has ever succeeded in penetrating the unfathomable depths of a woman's mind? What

fools we men are to assume a knowledge of the sex until we are married, and have the object lesson before us day by day! There is Carlotta, for example. Carlotta's prevailing trouble is that she is jealous of me. She seems to think that because she cut herself off from her family for my sake, I am to be at her beck and call henceforth and for ever. This peculiar form of jealousy interests and amuses me. It is a pleasure to study it from a scientific basis. This morning I told her I was going to Florence for a day or two, and she wept because I would not allow her to accompany me. I could see that she does not trust me, wherefore I caused a friend of mine who can imitate a woman's writing excellently, to write me a passionate love-letter, which fell quite naturally into Carlotta's hands.

"The scene which followed was exquisitely amusing. I have never seen a woman weep to such an extent before. Positively my charming Carlotta was enchanting. I was quite sorry at length when she assumed a mantle of dignity, and left me. Still, this is only the first of many such scenes if I engineered them properly. I see that Carlotta is in possession of all the emotions, so that, by studying her alone, I shall be in a position to add some really extraordinary chapters to my great book on women and their ways.

"March 19th, 1887. Carlotta has afforded me a month of absolute enjoyment. Why do people pay money to sit in stuffy theatres and watch comedies and tragedies when they can see and hear the real, palpitating thing for nothing? Outwardly, Carlotta and myself are at daggers drawn. She thinks I am unrepentant and angry, but, as to myself, I have never been more cheerful and happy in my life. And when Carlotta threatens to leave me, I ask her why she is going, knowing perfectly well that she has not the slightest intention of leaving me. Women are very much like cats in these matters--they will make many sacrifices for the sake of the domestic hearth. I was talking to Dr. Sacci, the great surgeon, the other day, and he was telling me of the fierce joy that comes through some new discovery which has been the outcome of vivisection. But, then, Sacci is only working in the interests of humanity, whereas my vivisection allows

me to see the exquisite suffering of the patient. I can study the nerves, and the palpitating wound, at the very moment when the knife enters.

"December 21st, 1887. The last chapter in my book is by far the most brilliant and searching which I have yet added to that fascinating volume. Whatever Carlotta suffers in the present, she shall go down to posterity as the martyr of her sex. I will place her on a pinnacle as high as my own. Indeed, I was almost sorry when I had to tell her the story of the love-letter, and how I had been playing on her feelings all these months. At the same time, I looked forward to the explanation, because I knew that it would open up to me a fresh phase of womanly nature. And I confess that it did with a vengeance. Carlotta turned pale. She stood there looking as if she were filled with the greatest physical agony, her eyes filled with tears which did not fall. I don't know how many days it is since she spoke to me last, but certainly it must be upwards of a fortnight. This is not exactly what I expected. It is only when a woman talks that one can judge of how the experiment is progressing. Tomorrow, all being well, I am going to adopt a new scheme which I hope will have the desired effect.

"December 22nd, 1887. Our little Vera has disappeared. Evidently she has been kidnapped with a view to a reward. The whole neighbourhood is up in arms, and my wife is distracted. It has often been a favourite theory of mine that every man takes a second place in a woman's affections as soon as her first child is born. I look back now with a vivid recollection of the early days when I first met Carlotta. I look back to her passionate love scenes, and her declarations that I should be first with her, then and always. Even though I was very much enamoured, I had my doubts when I was alone, and in a position to debate the matter clearly. The time has come to put the question to a test, and thus it became necessary for Vera to disappear. I might say at once that my theory has been vindicated to the letter. I now know that Carlotta cares far more for Vera than she does for me. The reflection is not soothing to one's

vanity, but there it is. There is a wildness and intensity in her grief, which she never would have experienced had I been brought home to her in the last stage of dissolution. I must keep this up. I must work this phase as long as it lasts, which will not be an indefinite time, because I must not drive my patient too far. She begins to show signs of collapse already. I think at the end of a week I must have Vera brought back again. By the expiration of that time, I fancy I can add another chapter to my remarkable book."

Walter stopped for a moment, his voice was full of loathing and disgust. An honest indignation almost choked him. He saw now that his anger and contempt were reflected on the face of Ravenspur.

"Do you want me to read any further," he said, "or is that sufficient? Shall I tell you, for instance, what happened after this inhuman wretch brought his child home again? Shall I tell you of other tortures and tyrannies, and how this scoundrel rejoices in the fact that his neighbours like him and pity him because he is married to a bad-tempered woman, who makes his life a burden? That is the note that runs all through this extraordinary diary. The man uses it as a weapon to play upon the feelings of his wife. If you are not yet satisfied I will pick out----"

"No, no," Ravenspur cried, as he rose to his feet. "I have heard enough and more than enough. Flavio must have been a madman; and yet I regarded him as one of the best and noblest of men. I never dreamt he had an enemy. I never knew anybody say a word against him. And to think that a man of the world like myself should be deceived in this way! Everything is now growing wonderfully clear before my eyes, Walter. I can even understand why the Countess left her daughter behind her. Fancy suffering all that trouble and humiliation to find, later on, that the child you had done so much for was likely to turn out as her father had done! In the last ten minutes you have proved that I was wrong, and the Countess was right; and

yet it seemed to me that I was justified in my actions. I don't know what I am going to do. I don't know what steps I can take to convince that unhappy woman that I acted for the best. At any rate, I must make a beginning before I go to bed tonight."

Ravenspur took up the volume and went down the stairs. In the drawing-room, the Countess, Mrs. Delahay, and Vera were still seated, talking earnestly together. Ravenspur crossed the room to the Countess's side and held out the book.

"Do you know what this contains?" he asked. "I suppose you have read it from cover to cover?"

"Once," said the Countess, with a shudder, "but never again."

"I can quite understand your feelings," Ravenspur said. "I have only heard extracts, but they have been quite sufficient for me. And now let me do my best to try and convince you that I acted in what I conceived to be the true interests of your child. I know now how wrong I was. I know that you have been made the victim of a scoundrel and a madman; and if you can forgive me for what I have done, I will be your grateful servant in the future."

"One moment," the Countess said. "There is another, and yet more painful thing to confess. I understand from your nephew that the police think that they have a most important clue to the murder of Louis Delahay. The police are all wrong. It is incredible to me that they have not discovered the truth before; that they have not blundered on it. Surely you can guess who it is who is responsible for the death of my poor sister's husband?"

"I am afraid," Ravenspur murmured, "that I cannot----"

"Not even after it was known that you were at work in the studio that night?"

"No, unless, perhaps--good heavens, you don't mean to say Silva?"

"Nobody else. The man tracked you to Fitzjohn Square. There was not one of your movements that he did not know. But come this way. I dare say the nurse will not mind us talking to the patient for a few moments alone. You shall hear Silva confirm what I have said to you."

Ravenspur stumbled to his feet. He was dazed and numbed with surprise; and yet the more he came to think of it, the more plausible it seemed. No, the nurse had no objection, it would not harm the patient. He was very near to his end now. Weak as he was, his eyes gleamed as he caught sight of Lord Ravenspur, the old wolfish look was on his face.

"We have been mistaken, my dear Silva," the Countess said. "Lord Ravenspur has been one of my best friends if I had only known it. He was deceived by my husband, as hundreds of others were. His lordship was led to believe that the Count was a martyr to a dreadful wife, a woman incapable of looking after a child. The kidnapping of my daughter was part of his vengeance upon me, so that he could reach me from the other side of the grave. Everything has been explained, the diary has been read by Lord Ravenspur; and he has forgiven you, he has come to your bedside to say so before you--you----"

"Die," Silva said, with an effort. "Curse his forgiveness. If I could stand up now----"

He could say no more, the malignant hate, the fire of madness, still gleamed in his dark eyes. He would hold the same tradition to the end. There was no chance of anything like a reconciliation here.

"I expected nothing else," the Countess said sadly. "Only a Corsican could understand his feelings. It is his blood, his religion. But if you can't forgive, my poor Silva, you can confess. It may be the means of saving an innocent life. It was you who were responsible for the death of Mr. Delahay?"

Silva nodded quite coolly. There was an upward heave of his shoulders that was very expressive. It was like one who confesses to a mistake.

"I understand," the Countess resumed. "It was a misunderstanding. You had traced Lord Ravenspur to the studio. You were going to kill him there. Only Mr. Delahay and myself interrupted you. You were probably hiding somewhere outside, waiting for your opportunity, when we arrived. You did not see us, you were not aware of anything till the lights were out. I may make errors in details, but in the main I am quite correct. No, don't try and talk--a nod is sufficient. When Mr. Delahay returned to the studio, after Lord Ravenspur was driven away, and after I had gone, you were in the studio. You mistook Mr. Delahay for Lord Ravenspur, and killed him with a glass Corsican dagger. You did not know till you saw the papers the next day that you had made a mistake?"

Silva nodded again. He did not appear to feel the least remorse, but his hungry eyes testified how he regretted that he had so signally failed. The old wild spirit was still there, even the approach of death could not quench it. Ravenspur turned away, filled with disgust and sadness.

"Really, there is nothing more to be said," he murmured. "I should like to put the heads of the confession down and get the unhappy man to sign it."

Silva affixed a straggling signature to the confession. Then he turned over on his side and refused to listen any more. Evidently he was going to die as he had lived--hard, unfeeling, carrying his bitter hatred to the grave.

"According to his lights," Ravenspur murmured, "let us hope that he will not be judged too harshly where he is going so soon."

CHAPTER XLVI.

A WOMAN'S HEART.

The hard, cold face had softened slightly. It seemed to Ravenspur that there was something akin to a smile in Countess Flavio's eyes when once more they were alone in the drawing-room together.

"Let us try and forget that dreadful scene," she said, "as I will try and forget what a hard, misunderstood life mine has been."

"It must have been terrible," Ravenspur exclaimed; "and yet there was not a man in Europe for whom I had a higher regard than I had for your husband. To me he was the soul of honour. I always found him generous and liberal-minded. I have seen him do the most spontaneous acts of kindness to strangers. It seemed hard to think that he was wholly bad."

"He was an enigma," the Countess replied. "In his brain lay a curious vein of madness, which vented itself upon me. No one else suffered, and, indeed, no one knew that I suffered, with the solitary exception of that poor lost soul who is lying at death's door upstairs. When I fled from my father's house, knowing that I had cut myself off entirely from my own flesh and blood, Silva followed me. From the first he began to see how I was suffering. From the first he began to entertain a malignant hatred of my husband."

"And finally poisoned him," Ravenspur suggested.

"Ah, there you are wrong," the Countess exclaimed. "With all the earnestness in my power I want to impress upon you that my

husband poisoned himself. As you have been informed, for generations there had been a feud between the Descartis and my husband's family. After my marriage it would have been an easy matter for my father to summon some of his retainers, and command them to avenge the honour and dignity of the family. My father chose not to do it. He was satisfied with the solemn assurance that only one child of his remained. The summons was sent out by Silva. He did not tell me. I did not know in the least what he was doing till afterwards. But the sign went forth, and my husband received his warning. There was no escape for him, and he knew it. That is why he took his own life. No doubt in doing so he was actuated by some extraordinary motive, for, with all his faults, he was no coward; but even from beyond the grave he persecuted me. His body was found in circumstances that pointed to me as the murderess. Oh, you may start and shrink, but what I tell you is absolutely true. The whole thing was planned, with diabolical ingenuity, by the Count on the night of his death. Had it not been for Silva I should have gone down to my grave execrated by all who knew me."

"But you were not there," Ravenspur expostulated. "It was proved that you were in Florence at the time."

"That was where Silva's cunning and ingenuity came in. During the few hours that preceded and followed that tragic event I saw nobody. I was utterly worn out and prostrated. I could not drag myself from my bed. But nobody saw me, for I had given strict orders that I was not to be disturbed. I did not know then that my sister was alive. In fact, I had got into such a state that I had no interest in anything. At that time my sister Maria was taking a holiday in Florence, and Silva was aware of the fact. When I ask you to notice the extraordinary likeness between us, you will have no trouble in guessing what happened. Silva was in a position to bring over scores of people from Florence, who swore that I was in that town at the time of the tragedy. It was a bold thing to do, and

nobody guessed, nobody doubted the sincerity of the witnesses, and thus my life was saved."

"It is a most extraordinary story," Ravenspur murmured. "But, really, there is no reason for you to justify yourself any further. We know that you are absolutely innocent of any sort of crime. I know now what kind of a life Flavio led you. Had I been aware at the time I should never have interfered. And yet Flavio managed to convey to me the impression that you were the last woman in the world who ought to have the custody of a child. I committed an illegal act at the earnest request of my old friend. I ran a great risk, but it seemed to me that I was justified in what I did."

"I see you are now," the Countess said thoughtfully. "For many, many years no doubt you have rejoiced in the fact that you saved Vera from a life of misery and unhappiness. You never expected to see or hear from me again. You looked upon the child as your own. And now, to a certain extent, I must justify myself. I stand in your eyes as a deeply wronged and injured woman, and yet you might say to yourself that as a mother I have been lacking in my duties. I tell you for a long time after the death of my husband my mind trembled on the borderline between reason and insanity. I was afraid to see my child. I was fearful lest I should find in her some trace of her father; and, if I had done so, I believe that I should have taken her life. But, gradually, as the years went on and I grew older, a longing to see my child came over me that amounted almost to a passion. I left my retreat in the mountains, and came into the world again. It was at this time that I met Silva once more, and for three years he was looking for my child. I need not tell you, Lord Ravenspur, how he got on the track."

Lord Ravenspur shivered and nodded in reply.

"I would have prevented that if I could," the Countess went on quickly. "I wanted no violence. But I knew that Silva would go his own way. I knew that nobody could check his fanaticism. In his eyes

you were marked down for slaughter. You had violated the dignity and honour of the family, and therefore you must be removed. Let me be quite candid--I think I hated you almost as much as Silva did. You had robbed me of my child at the instigation of my cruel husband. Not unnaturally, I regarded you as being little or no better than Count Flavio. All the same, as I said before, I wanted no violence. That was one of the reasons why I did not come to your house and claim my child. I felt sure that you would defy me, and place Vera somewhere beyond my reach."

"Most undoubtedly I should," Ravenspur said candidly. "You see, I did not know then that you were capable----"

"Of looking after my daughter," the Countess interrupted. "And, from your point of view, your actions would have been justified. As soon as the danger threatened seriously you made arrangements to get away from England until Vera was of age, and capable of acting for herself. But Silva found out----"

"One moment," Vera cried eagerly. "Was your servant, Silva, in Park Lane disguised as a blind organ-grinder?"

"I understand so," the Countess went on. "At any rate, Silva managed things, in his usual able manner. He contrived to get Vera away from Lady Ringmar's party, and bring here down her. I daresay you will think that this was all very melodramatic and unnecessary, but, as I pointed out to you before, I wanted no violence. I thought when Silva's plan was successful that I should be able to persuade him to forego the rest of his vengeance. I thought that once I had my daughter back in my own hands, I could take her out of the country and get Silva to accompany me. Then you, Lord Ravenspur, would have been safe. But in certain matters Silva is quite as insane as my husband was. It was in vain that I appealed to him. He had made his vow, and he was going to carry it out. It is only fitting that he should have brought so just a punishment upon his own shoulders."

"And yet there is something magnificent in a vengeance like his," Ravenspur said, thoughtfully. "Now that everything is cleared up, how simple it seems. There is only one thing that puzzles me, and that is your connection with my unfortunate friend Louis Delahay. It seems a remarkable thing that both you sisters should have known Delahay. How did it come about?"

"That I have just been explaining at some length," the Countess said. "But for your benefit I will go over the ground again."

Ravenspur listened with the greatest interest to the story which the Countess had to tell. She told him vividly enough of the eventful night when she had made up her mind to leave her husband's roof, and how her life had been saved at a critical moment by a total stranger, who turned out to be Louis Delahay--the same Delahay who, years afterwards, met Maria Descarti and made her his wife. She told the story of the jewels, and how the time had come when she needed them, to turn into money to aid her in her search for Vera. Then she went on to speak of her meeting with Delahay.

"One moment," Ravenspur said. "When Louis married you, Mrs. Delahay, did he not notice your extraordinary likeness to the Countess, whom he had befriended so many years ago?"

"He couldn't," the Countess exclaimed. "Not only was our interview in the dark, but I was wearing a veil. Oh, you may say it was an extraordinary thing to trust my valuables to a perfect stranger, but more amazing things happen every day, and I was beside myself with grief and terror and despair at the time. At any rate, I did it, and I got my jewels back again. I can tell you, if you like, the story of that strange interview. I can describe how I went down to the studio with Mr. Delahay, and how we saw you there. But we are wasting time and it is getting late. There is only one thing to regret now, and that is the death of my sister's husband; but it has always been useless for a Descarti to expect anything like happiness in this world. Never was one of our family yet, who was not born to misery

and despair. Still, one can now look forward to a more pleasant time. I am quite sure, after what has happened, that you will not try to stand between Vera and myself any longer, Lord Ravenspur. I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done."

"Vera has been very dear to me," Lord Ravenspur said, with some emotion. "I daresay we shall be able to explain matters satisfactorily, so that people will not be in a position to talk. And now, as it is getting so very late----"

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE PASSING OF THE VENGEANCE.

It was well into the following afternoon when the trained nurse came quietly down the stairs, and announced to Lord Ravenspur that her task was finished. Silva had died in his sleep. The troubled spirit was at rest, the tardy confession had been made, and Lord Ravenspur had no longer any occasion to fear the vengeance that had followed him so long. There would have to be an inquest, of course--as there was. But there was nothing much here to arouse public curiosity. A servant at the house on the common had been severely mauled by a savage dog prowling about, and he had succumbed to the shock. The newspapers had a few paragraphs, but in a day or two the incident was forgotten, nor was there any occasion to worry the owner of the house, seeing that the place had been taken by Silva in the proper name of his mistress. The servants had seen nothing either, so that scandal was entirely checked. It would, perhaps, be a

difficult matter later on to explain the unexpected reappearance of Vera's mother, but it seemed to Ravenspur that he could see a way to solve that problem. And after the lapse of eighteen years, nobody would identify the Countess Flavio with the Italian scandal that had been a sensation in Europe back in the 'eighties. Ravenspur and the Countess were good enough friends now, and Mrs. Delahay was beginning to recover her health and strength again. Already the Fitzjohn Square murder had ceased to occupy public attention now that the tragedy had been solved, and there was no chance of the culprit being brought before an earthly tribunal. As to Cooney, he got off quite as lightly as he deserved. And there are always new sensations to follow the old.

"I think, on the whole, you had better remain here for the present," Ravenspur suggested. "You have the house on your hands for two months, and, really, it is a very pleasant place. Everybody is out of town for the present, and very few of my friends will be back in London again before the autumn. This will give us time to invent some plausible story to account for your reappearance. I don't like that kind of thing as a rule, but it is quite essential in this case."

"What are you going to do yourself?" the Countess asked.

"I am going to have a couple of quiet months on the continent. As you can imagine, my nerves are considerably shaken, and I am not so young as I used to be. I shall miss Vera, of course, but I think it is far better for her to stay here with you, so that you can get to know one another properly. But has it ever occurred to you, Countess, that before long Vera will have another and a closer guardian than either of our two selves?"

"I suppose that is inevitable," the Countess said as she looked thoughtfully across the flower-beds. "Still, the fault is my own. I deliberately wasted eighteen years, and it is hardly to be expected that Vera--but don't let us anticipate."

"I am afraid the mischief is done," Ravenspur smiled. "From a remark that Vera let slip the other night, I learnt a great deal that has been going on in her mind. Goodness knows how she got the impression, but she honestly believed that I was something more than her guardian, and that, between you and myself--but I mustn't pain you by being more definite. Anyway, I now know why Vera appeared to be so unhappy and miserable a few weeks ago, and why she conceived the idea of leaving my house, and going out into the world to get her own living. To make matters quite plain, she and my nephew have fallen in love with one another and she thought that I should oppose the match. As a matter of fact, I did. But not for the reasons that Vera supposed. What I was afraid of was that the vengeance intended for me might have been transferred to Walter, had he married Vera then. Of course, matters are on a totally different footing now, and nobody is more delighted than myself. Walter is a fine fellow. He will be rich some of these days. He will succeed to the title at my death. If I were you, Countess, I would not interfere with that arrangement."

"I am afraid it would be too late in any case," the Countess said, sadly. "I have no right to say a word. And, from what I have seen of your nephew, I should say that he will make a good husband for any girl. Still, it is rather a disappointment to find that I have been supplanted in this way, though I am bound to admit that the fault is entirely my own."

Ravenspur was quite content to leave it discreetly at that, and all the more so because Vera herself was at that moment coming down the garden path. The girl's face was bright and happy now. The look of trouble had vanished from her eyes. The sun was shining full in her face, and as the Countess regarded her daughter critically she could see no suggestion of her father in her face. As Lord Ravenspur moved away, Vera took her place by her mother's side.

"What have you two been plotting?" she asked gaily.

"We have been discussing your future," the Countess replied. "Lord Ravenspur has been telling me something which, apparently, I ought to have guessed before. I was looking forward to a year or two in your company, but I am told that that is more than I can expect. There is a certain young man----"

"You are speaking of Walter," Vera murmured. A little colour crept into her cheeks. Her eyes were bright and smiling. "Positively there has been no time to tell you about Walter. Do you know, mother, that Walter and myself have been lovers ever since I was fourteen? There has never been anybody like Walter in my eyes. And then, a few months ago, it seemed to come to me in a different way altogether. I suppose when I came to years of discretion I could see things more plainly. But how could I marry Walter when I had no name of my own? I felt sure that Lord Ravenspur would be sternly opposed to anything of the kind. And that is why I wanted to leave his house and earn my own living. But now that I am a Flavio, that is a different matter. We are quite as well born as the Ravenspurs, and so far as my guardian is concerned----"

"The path is smooth enough now," the Countess smiled. "Lord Ravenspur told me just now that he was delighted with the turn of events. There is no girl he knows he would rather have for a niece than yourself. But I wasn't going to say that, Vera. What I want to impress upon you is this--I am not going to stand between you and your happiness for a moment. If your lover wants you now, go to him and don't consider me. Take your happiness when you get the opportunity. Let me before I die see one Descarti, at least, who has her heart's desire. And now we won't say any more about it, my child. After all, I am better treated than I deserve."

The dusk was beginning to fall at length. The garden was fragrant with the scent of flowers, holding their heads high to reach the dropping dew. It was a warm evening, and the French windows in the dining-room were widely open. Dinner was almost over. The table was littered with fruit. There was just the suggestion of

scented tobacco smoke hanging on the air. Ravenspur sat chatting almost gaily with the Countess and her sister. The gloom had lifted from his face now. He appeared to be years younger during the last few days. Vera rose from her chair and stood by the window, drinking in the subtle delights of the evening. Walter crossed over to her side, and placed his arm under hers.

"Come outside," he said. "It is a shame to stay indoors a night like this. Besides, I have something important to say to you."

Vera turned and smiled into her lover's face. She had never felt the least shy or awkward with him--they were too good friends for that. They walked in silence together down the path, with the roses rioting on either side. They came at length to a little secluded terrace looking over the common. Behind the bracken and the heather the sun was sinking in a track of golden glory. The after-light shone in Vera's eyes, and rendered them glorious. Walter turned to her eagerly. He had his arm about her waist now, her head bent towards his shoulder. It all seemed the most natural thing in the world, the fitting crown to their romance.

"How long is it," Walter asked, "since you wanted to run away and leave us? I won't ask you why you wanted to go, because my uncle has told me that. My dearest girl, there is no occasion for you to blush and look uncomfortable. I am sure that your motives did you every credit. But we will pass over that. We need never allude to it again. I have spoken to your mother, and what my uncle's feelings are you know for yourself. All the dangers and troubles have gone now. Everything lies fair and smooth between us. And now, little Vera, when are we to be married?"

Vera turned slowly and thoughtfully. She laid her hands upon Walter's shoulders, and looked steadily and lovingly into his smiling eyes. Her words were low and sweet.

"Dear old boy," she said, "we have always been friends, and more than friends, and in my heart of hearts I have ever felt that it must come to this, whatever obstacles stood in the way. I am not so brave as I thought I was, Walter, and I don't believe I could have left you when it came to the pinch. Oh, I'll marry you, dear; I'll marry you gladly and willingly, and be the happiest girl in all the world. But not yet; not till our time is up here; not till I have spent the next two months with my mother. And you won't love me any the less because I have thought of her as well as you?"

Walter kissed the sweet, serious lips.

"It shall be as you say, sweetheart. And now let us go back, and tell the others all about it."

"There is only one thing that remains," Walter said, as he and Lord Ravenspur walked up and down after dinner, with their cigars. "That photo, uncle. The one that you were so worried about, in the studio on the night when Sir James was attacked by Silva in mistake for you. Where did it come from, and why did it agitate you so?"

"I had almost forgotten that," Ravenspur smiled. "Well, that photo was tied, with a small packet of jewels, round Vera's neck when I carried her away from Italy. I did not know till lately that it was a photo of her mother. She must have been a lovely woman then. Being an artist, I rather idealised that photograph--indeed, I painted the picture that Silva stole from it. It was only when the picture was finished that I discovered I had made a very strong likeness to Vera; and then I had my doubts. Here was Vera's mother in the flesh again. Had I done wrong? Had Flavio deceived me? The thing has troubled my conscience ever since. A woman with a face like that to be a fiend! Never. And yet----

"Still, it is all over now. There have been faults on all sides, so that we can all afford to forget and forgive. And that, my dear boy, is all I

have to say."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MIDNIGHT
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