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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

A Novel.

By J. S. LE FANU,

AUTHOR OF "UNCLE SILAS," "GUY DEVERELL," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

1869.

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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

CHAPTER I.

THE SUMMONS.

When Charles Fairfield came into the wainscoted dining-room a few minutes later it looked very cosy. The sun had broken the pile of western clouds, and sent low and level a red light flecked with trembling leaves on the dark panels that faced the windows.

Outside in that farewell glory of the day the cawing crows were heard returning to the sombre woods of Carwell, and the small birds whistled and warbled pleasantly in the clear air, and chatty sparrows in the ivy round gossiped and fluttered merrily before

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the little community betook themselves to their leafy nooks and couched their busy little heads for the night under their brown wings.

He looked through the window towards the gloriously-stained sky and darkening trees, and he thought,—

"A fellow like me, who has seen out his foolish days and got to value better things, who likes a pretty view, and a cigar, and a stroll by a trout-brook, and a song now and then, and a book, and a friendly guest, and a quiet glass of wine, and who has a creature like Alice to love and be loved by, might be devilish happy in this queer lonely corner, if only the load were off his heart."

He sighed; but something of that load was for the moment removed; and as pretty Alice came in at the open door, he went to meet her, and drew her fondly to his heart.

"We must be very happy this evening, Alice. Somehow I feel that everything will go well with us yet. If just a few little

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hitches and annoyances were got over, I should be the happiest fellow, I think, that ever bore the name of Fairfield; and you, darling creature, are the light of that happiness. My crown and my life—my beautiful Alice, my joy and my glory—I wish you knew half how I love you, and how proud I am of you."

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie, this is delightful. Oh, Ry, my darling! I'm too happy."

And with these words, in the strain of her slender embrace, she clung to him as he held her locked to his heart.

The affection was there; the love was true. In the indolent nature of Charles Fairfield capabilities of good were not wanting. That dreadful interval in the soul's history, between the weak and comparatively noble state of childhood and that later period when experience saddens and illuminates and begins to turn our looks regretfully backward, was long past with him. The period when women "come out" and see the world, and men in

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the old-fashioned phrase "sow their wild oats"—that glorious summer-time of self-love, sin, and folly—that bleak and bitter winter of the soul, through which the mercy of God alone preserves for us alive the dormant germs of good, was past for him, without killing, as it sometimes does, all the tenderness and truth of the nursery. In this man, Charles Fairfield, were the trodden-down but still living affections which now, in this season, unfolded themselves anew—simplicity unkilled, and the purity not of Eden, not of childhood, but of *recoil*. Altogether a man who had not lost himself—capable of being happy—capable of being regenerated.

I know not exactly what had evoked this sudden glow and effervescence. Perhaps it needs some manifold confluence of internal and external conditions, trifling and unnoticed, except for such unexplained results, to evolve these tremblings and lightings up that surprise us like the fiercer analogies of volcanic chemistry.

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It is sad to see what appear capabilities and opportunities of a great happiness so nearly secured, and yet by reason of some inflexible caprice of circumstance quite unattainable.

It was not for some hours, and until after his wife had gone to her room, that the darkness and chill that portended the return of his worst care crept over him as he sat and turned over the leaves of his book.

He got up and loitered discontentedly about the room. Stopping now before the little book-shelves between the windows and adjusting unconsciously their contents; now at the little oak table, and fiddling with the flowers which Alice had arranged in a tall old glass, one of the relics of other days of Carwell; and so on, listless, irresolute.

"So here I am once more—back again among my enemies! Happiness for me, a momentary illusion — hope a cheat. My *reality* is the blackness of the abyss. God help me!"

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He turned up his eyes, and he groaned this prayer, unconscious that it was a prayer.

"I will," he thought, "extract the sting from this miserable mystery. Between me and Alice it shall be a secret no longer. I'll tell her to-morrow. I'll look out an opportunity; I will by——"

And to nail himself to his promise this irresolute man repeated the same passionate oath, and he struck his hand on the table.

Next day, therefore, when Alice was again among the flowers in the garden he entered that antique and solemn shade with a strange sensation at his heart of fear and grief. How would Alice look on him after it was over? How would she bear it?

Pale as the man who walks after the coffin of his darling, between the tall gray piers he entered that wild and umbrageous enclosure.

His heart seemed to stop still as he saw little Alice, all unsuspicious of his dreadful

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message, working with her tiny trowel at the one sunny spot of the garden.

She stood up—how pretty she was!—looking on her work; and as she stood with one tiny foot advanced, and her arms folded, with her garden-gloves on, and the little diamond-shaped trowel glittering in her hand, she sang low to herself an air which he remembered her singing when she was quite a little thing long ago at Wyvern—when he never dreamed she would be anything to him—just a picture of a little brown-haired girl and nothing dearer.

Then she saw him, and—

"Oh, Ry, darling!" she cried, as making a diagonal from the distant point, she ran towards him through tall trees and old raspberries, and under the boughs of over-grown fruit trees, which now-a-days bore more moss and lichen than pears or cherries upon them.

"Ry, how delightful! You so seldom come here, and now I have you, you shall see all

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I'm doing, and how industrious I have been ; and we are going to have such a happy little ramble. Has anything happened, darling ?" she said, suddenly stopping and looking in his face.

Here was an opportunity ; but if his resolution was still there, presence of mind failed him, and forcing a smile, he instantly answered—

"Nothing, darling — nothing whatever. Come, let us look at your work ; you are so industrious, and you have such wonderful taste."

And as, reassured, and holding his hand, she prattled and laughed, leading him round by the grass-grown walks to her garden, as she called that favoured bit of ground on which the sun shone, he hardly saw the old currant bushes or gray trunks of the rugged trees ; his sight seemed dazzled ; his hearing seemed confused ; and he thought to himself—

"Where am I—what is this—and can it

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be true that I am so weak or so mad as to be turned from the purpose over which I have been brooding for a day and a night, and to which I had screwed my courage so resolutely, by a smile and a question—What is this? Black currant; and this is groundsel; and little Alice, your glove wants a stitch or two," he added aloud; "and oh! here we are. Now you must enlighten me; and what a grove of little sticks, and little inscriptions. These are your annuals, I suppose?"

And so they talked, and she laughed and chatted very merrily, and he had not the heart—perhaps the courage—to deliver his detested message; and again it was postponed.

The next day Charles Fairfield fell into his old gloom and anxieties; the temporary relief was felt no more, and the usual reaction followed.

It is something to have adopted a resolution. The anguish of suspense, at least, is

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ended, and even if it be to undergo an operation, and to blow one's own brains out, men will become composed, and sometimes even cheerful, as the coroner's inquest discovers, when once the way and the end are known.

But this melancholy serenity now failed Charles Fairfield, for without acknowledging it, he began a little to recede from his resolution. Then was the dreadful question, how will she bear it, and even worse, how will she view the position? Is she not just the person to leave forthwith a husband thus ambiguously placed, and to insist that this frightful claim, however shadowy, should be met and determined in the light of day?

"I know very well what an idol she makes of me, poor little thing; but she would not stay here an hour after she heard it; she would go straight to Lady Wyndale. It would break her heart, but she would do it."

It was this fear that restrained him. Im-

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pelling him, however, was the thought that, sooner or later, if Harry's story were true, his enemy would find him out, and his last state be worse than his first.

Again and again he cursed his own folly for not having consulted his shrewd brother before his marriage. How horribly were his words justified. How easy it would have been comparatively to disclose all to Alice before leading her into such a position. He did not believe that there was actual danger in this claim. He could swear that he meant no villany. Weak and irresolute, in a trying situation, he had been—that was all. But could he be sure that the world would not stigmatize him as a villain ?

Another day passed, and he could not tell what a day might bring—a day of feverish melancholy, of abstraction, of agitation.

She had gone to her room. It was twelve o'clock at night, when, having made up his mind to make his agitating shrift, he mounted

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the old oak stairs, with his candle in his hand.

"Who's there?" said his wife's voice from the room.

"I, darling."

And at the door she met him in her dressing-gown. Her face was pale and miserable, and her eyes swollen with crying.

"Oh, Ry, darling, I'm so miserable; I think I shall go mad."

And she hugged him fast in trembling arms, and sobbed convulsively on his breast.

Charles Fairfield froze with a kind of terror. He thought, "she has found out the whole story." She looked up in his face, and that was the face of a ghost.

"Oh, Ry, darling, for God's sake tell me—is there anything very bad—is it debt only that makes you so wretched; I am in such dreadful uncertainty. Have mercy on your poor little miserable wife, and tell me whatever it is—tell me all!"

Here you would have said was something

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more urgent than the opportunity which he coveted; but the sight of that gaze of wildest misery smote and terrified him, it looked in reality so near despair, so near insanity.

"To tell her will be to kill her," something seemed to whisper, and he drew her closer to him, and kissed her and laughed.

"Nothing on earth but money—the want of money — debt. Upon my soul you frightened me, Alice, you looked so, so piteous. I thought you had something dreadful to tell me; but, thank God, you are quite well, and haven't even seen a ghost. You must not always be such a foolish little creature. I'm afraid this place will turn our heads. Here we are safe and sound, and nothing wrong but my abominable debts. You would not wonder at my moping if you knew what debt is; but I won't look, if I can help it, quite so miserable for the future; for, after all, we must have money soon, and you know they can't hang me for owing

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them a few hundreds ; and I'm quite angry with myself for having annoyed you so, you poor little thing,"

"My noble Ry, it is so good of you, you make me so happy, I did not know what to think, but you have made me quite cheerful again, and I really do think it is being so much alone, I watch your looks so much, and everything prays on me so, and that seems so odious when I have my darling along with me ; but Ry will forgive his foolish little wife, I know he will, he's always so good and kind."

Then followed more re-assuring speeches from Charles, and more raptures from poor Alice. And the end was that for a time Charles was quite turned away from his purpose. I don't know, however, that he was able to keep his promise about more cheerful looks, certainly not beyond a day or two.

A few days later he heard a tragic bit of news. Tom related to him that the miller's young wife, down at Raxleigh, hearing on a

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sudden that her husband was drowned in the mill-stream, though 'twas nothing after all but a ducking, was "took wi' fits, and died in three days time."

So much for surprising young wives with alarming stories! Charles Fairfield listened, and made the application for himself.

A few days later a letter was brought into the room, where rather silently Charles and his wife were at breakfast. It came when he had almost given up the idea of receiving one for some days, perhaps weeks, and he had begun to please himself with the idea that the delay augured well, and Harry's silence was a sign that the alarm was subsiding.

Here, however, was a letter addressed to him in Harry's bold hand. His poor little wife sitting next the tea things, eyed her husband as he opened it, with breathless alarm; she saw him grow pale as he glanced at it; he lowered it to the table cloth, and bit his lip, his eye still fixed on it.

As he did not turn over the leaf, she saw

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it could not be a long one, and must all be comprised within one page.

"Ry, darling," she asked, also very pale, in a timid voice, "it's nothing very bad. Oh, darling, what is it?"

He got up and walked to the window silently.

"What do you say, darling?" he asked, suddenly, after a little pause.

She repeated her question.

"No, darling, nothing, but—but possibly we may have to leave this. You can read it, darling."

He laid the letter gently on the tablecloth beside her, and she picked it up, and read—

"MY DEAR CHARLIE,

"The old soldier means business. I think you must go up to London, but be sure to meet me to-morrow at Hatherton, say the Commercial Hotel, at four o'clock, P.M.

"Your affectionate brother,

"HARRY FAIRFIELD."

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"Who does he mean by the old soldier?' asked Alice, very much frightened, after a silence.

"One of those d——d people who are plaguing me," said Charles, who had returned to the window, and answered, still looking out.

"And what is his real name, darling?"

"I'm ashamed to say that Harry knows ten times as well as I all about my affairs. I pay interest through his hands, and he watches those people's movements; he's a rough diamond, but he has been very kind, and you see his note—where is it? Oh, thanks. I must be off in half an hour, to meet the coach at the 'Pied Horse.'"

"Let me go up, darling, and help you to pack, I know where all your things are," said poor little Alice, who looked as if she was going to faint.

"Thank you, darling, you are such a good

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little creature, and never think of yourself—never, never—*half enough.*"

His hands were on her shoulders, and he was looking in her face, with sad strange eyes, as he said this, slowly, like a man spelling out an inscription.

"I wish—I wisb a thousand things. God knows how heavy my heart is. If you cared for yourself Alice, like other women, or that I weren't a fool—but—but you, poor little thing, it was such a venture, such a sea, such a crazy boat to sail in."

"I would not give up my Ry, my darling, my husband, my handsome, clever, noble Ry—I'd lose a thousand lives if I had them, one by one, for you, Charlie; and oh, if you left me, I should die."

"Poor little thing," he said, drawing her to him with a trembling strain, and in his eyes, unseen by her, tears were standing.

"If you leave this, won't you take me, Charlie? won't you let me go wherever you go? and oh, if they take my man—I'm to go

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with you, Charlie, promise that, and oh, my darling, you're not sorry you married your poor little Alley."

"Come, darling, come up ; you shall hear from me in a day or two, or see me. This will blow over, as so many other troubles have done," he said, kissing her fondly.

And now began the short fuss and confusion of a packing on brief notice, while Tom harnessed the horse, and put him to the dog-cart.

And the moment having arrived, down came Charles Fairfield, and Tom swung his portmanteau into its place, and poor little Alice was there with, as Old Dulcibella said, "her poor little face all cried," to have a last look, and a last word, her tiny feet on the big unequal paving stones, and her eyes following Charlie's face, as he stepped up and arranged his rug and coat on the seat, and then jumped down for the last hug ; and the wild, close, hurried whisperings, last words of love and cheer from laden hearts, and pale

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smiles, and the last, *really* the last look, and the dog-cart and Tom, and the portmanteau and Charlie, and the sun's blessed light, disappear together through the old gateway under the wide stone arch, with tufted ivy and careless sparrows, and little Alice stands alone on the pavement for a moment, and runs out to have one last wild look at the disappearing "trap," under the old trees, as it rattled swiftly down to the narrow road of Carwell Valley.

It vanished—it was gone—the tinkling of the wheels was heard no more. The parting, for the present, was quite over, and poor little Alice turned at last, and threw her arms about the neck of kind old Dulcibella, who had held her when a baby in her arms in the little room at Wyvern Vicarage, and saw her now a young wife, "wooed and married, and a'," in the beauty and the sorrows of life; and the light air of autumn rustled in the foliage above her, and a withered leaf or two fell from the sunlit summits to the shadow at

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her feet; and the old woman's kind eyes filled with tears, and she whispered homely comfort, and told her she would have him back again in a day or two, and not to take on so; and with her gentle hand, as she embraced her, patted her on the shoulder, as she used in other years—that seemed like yesterday—to comfort her in nursery troubles. But our sorrows outgrow their simple consolations, and turn us in their gigantic maturity to the sympathy and wisdom that is sublime and eternal.

Days passed away, and a precious note from Charlie came. It told her where to write to him in London, and very little more.

The hasty scrawl added, indeed emphatically, that she was to tell his address to no one. So she shut it up in the drawer of the old-fashioned dressing-table, the key of which she always kept with her.

Other days passed. The hour was dull at

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Carwell Grange for Alice. But things moved on in their dull routine without event or alarm.

Old Mildred Tarnley was sour and hard as of old, and up to a certain time neither darker nor brighter than customary. Upon a day, however, there came a shadow and a fear upon her.

Two or three times on that day and the next, was Mrs. Tarnley gliding, when old Dulcibella with her mistress was in the garden, about Alice's bed-room, noiselessly as a shadow. The little girl downstairs did not know where she was. It was known but to herself—and what she was about. Coming down those dark stairs, and going up, she went on tiptoe, and looked black and stern as if she was "laying out" a corpse up-stairs.

Accidentally old Dulcibella, coming into the room on a message from the garden, surprised lean, straight Mrs. Tarnley, feloniously trying to turn a key, from a bunch in

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her hand, in the lock of the dressing-table drawer.

"Oh, la! Mrs. Tarnley," cried old Dulcibella, very much startled.

The two women stood perfectly still, staring at one another. Each looked scared. Stiff Mildred Tarnley, without, I think, being the least aware of it, dropped a stiff short courtesy, and for some seconds more the silence continued.

"What *be* you a-doing here, Mrs. Tarnley?" at length demanded Dulcibella Crane.

"No occasion to tell *you*," replied Mildred, intrepidly. "Another one, that owed her as little as I'm like ever to do, would tell your young mistress. But I don't want to break her heart—what for should I? There's dark stories enough about the Grange without no one hangin' theirself in their garters. What I want is where to direct a letter to Master Charles—that's all."

"I can't say, I'm sure," said old Dulcibella.

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"She got a letter from him o' Thursday last; 'twill be in it no doubt, and that I take it, ma'am, is in this drawer, for she used not to lock it; and I expect you, if ye love your young mistress, to help me to get at it," said Mrs. Tarnley, firmly.

"Lor, Mrs. Tarnley, ma'am! *me* to pick a lock, ma'am! I'd die first. Ye can't mean it?"

"I knowd ye was a fool. I shouldn't 'a said nothing to ye about it," said Mildred, with sharp disdain.

"Lawk! I never was so frightened in my life!" responded Dulcibella.

"Ye'll be more so, mayhap. I wash my hands o' ye," said Mrs. Tarnley, with a furious look, and a sharp little stamp on the floor. "I thought o' nothing but your mistress's good, and if ye tell her I was here, I'll explain all, for I won't lie under no surmises, and I think 'twill be the death of her."

"Oh, this place, this hawful place! I never

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was so frightened in my days," said Dulcibella, looking very white.

"She's in the garden now, I do suppose," said Mildred, "and if ye mean to tell her what I was about, 'taint a pin's head to me, but I'll go out and tell her myself, and even if she lives through it, she'll never hold up her head more, and that's all *you'll* hear from Mildred Tarnley."

"Oh, dear! dear! dear! my heart, how it goes!"

"Come, come, woman, you're nothin' so squeamish, I dare say."

"Well," said Dulcibella; "it may be all as you say, ma'am, and I'll say ye this justice, I ha'n't missed to the value of a pennypiece since we come here, but if ye promise me, only ye won't come up here no more while we're out, Mrs. Tarnley, I won't say nothing about it."

"That settles it, keep your word, Mrs. Crane, and I'll keep mine; I'll burn my fingers no more in other people's messes;'

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and she shook the key with a considerable gingle of the whole bunch from the keyhole, and popped it grimly into her pocket.

"Your sarvant, Mrs. Crane."

"Yours, Mrs. Tarnley, ma'am," replied Dulcibella.

And the interview which had commenced so brusquely, ended with ceremony, as Mildred Tarnley withdrew.

That old woman was in a sort of fever that afternoon and the next day, and her temper, Lilly Dogger thought, grew more and more savage as night approached. She had in her pocket a friendly fulsome little letter, which had reached her through the post, announcing an arrival for the night that was now approaching. The coach that changed horses at the "Pied Horse," was due there at half-past eleven, P.M., but might not be there till twelve, and then there was a long drive to Carwell Grange.

"I'm wore out wi' them, I'm tired to death; I'm wore off my feet wi' them; I'm

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worked like a hoss. 'Twould be well for Mildred Tarnley, I'm thinkin', she was under the mould wi' a stone at her head, and shut o' them all."

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CHAPTER II.

LILLY DOGGER IS SENT TO BED.

THAT night the broad-shouldered child, Lilly Dogger, was up later than usual. An arrear of pots and saucepans to scour, along with customary knives and forks to clean, detained her.

"Bustle, you buzzy, will ye?" cried the harsh voice of old Mildred, who was adjusting the kettle on the kitchen fire, while in the scullery the brown-eyed little girl worked away at the knife-board. A mutton-fat, fixed in a tin sconce on the wall, so as to command both the kitchen and the scullery, economically lighted each, the old woman and her drudge, at her work.

"Yes'm, please," she said, interrogatively,

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for the noise of her task prevented her hearing distinctly.

"Be alive, I say. It's gone eleven, you slut; ye should a bin in your bed an hour," screeched Mildred, and then relapsed into her customary grumble.

"Yes, Mrs. Tarnley, please'm," answered the little girl, resuming with improved energy.

Drowsy enough was the girl. If there had been a minute's respite from her task, I think she would have nodded.

"Be them things rubbed up or no, or do you mean to 'a done to-night, huzzy?" cried Mrs. Tarnley, this time so near as to startle her, for she had unawares put her wrinkled head into the scullery. "Stop that for to-night, I say. Leave 'em lay, ye'll finish in the morning."

"Shall I take down the fire, Mrs. Tarnley, ma'am, please?" asked Lilly Dogger, after a little pause.

"No, ye shan't. What's that ye see on

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the fire ; have ye eyes in your head ? Don't ye see the kettle there ? How do I know but your master'll be home to-night, and want a cup o' tea, or—law knows what ?"

Mrs. Tarnley looked put about, as she phrased it, and in one of those special tempers which accompanied that state. So Lilly Dogger, eyeing her with wide open eyes, made her a frightened little courtesy.

"Why don't ye get up betimes in the morning, huzzy, and then ye needn't be mopin' about half the night ? All the colour's washed out o' your big, ugly, platter face, wi' your laziness—as white as a turnip. When I was a girl, if I left my work over so, I'd 'a the broomstick across my back, I promise ye, and bread and water next day too good for my victuals ; but now ye thinks ye can do as ye like, and all's changed ! An' every upstart brat is as good as her betters. But don't ye think ye'll come it over me, lass, don't ye. Look up there at the clock, will ye, or do ye want me to pull

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