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The Viking's Skull

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The Viking's Skull

By

John R. Carling

Author of "The Shadow of the Czar," etc., etc.

Boston
Little, Brown, and Company
1904

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THE VIKING'S SKULL

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I

"THE ENGLISH LADY"

ON one of the granitic peninsulas of Western Brittany stands the little town of Quilaix, situated in a hollow facing the sea. To the ordinary tourist the place presents few features of interest beyond its ivy-mantled church, whose doors bear the counterfeit presentment of fishes carved in oak: which fact, when added to the name of the edifice — *La Chapelle des Pêcheurs* — serves to indicate the general occupation of the inhabitants.

For the convenience of the fisher-folk an L-shaped stone pier has been raised in the sea. The duty of watching over this structure, whose stability was often threatened by the fury of the Atlantic, pertained to Paul Marais, familiarly known as "Old Pol," who, to his office of harbour-master added likewise that of collector of the customs.

Paul Marais dwelt in the street called, perhaps by way of satire, La Grande. His house was a quaint mixture of timber and stone, with dormer lattices set in the red tiles of the roof. It leaned against its neighbour for support, with every doorway and window-frame out of the perpendicular. Yet it had stood firm during three centuries, and would probably continue to stand during as many more.

One chill afternoon in March Old Pol was sauntering

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to and fro in front of his house, thoughtfully smoking a pipe. After half an hour spent in this pleasant idling he suddenly quickened his pace and entered his abode, passing to the parlour with its red-tiled sanded floor, where, around the bright polished *chaufferette* sat Madame Marais and three or four old dames, all busily knitting, and all enjoying those pleasures dear to the heart of every Breton woman, to wit, cider and gossip.

"Celestine," said Pol, "the diligence is coming."

"Paul Marais," replied his wife with tart dignity, "don't be a fool."

And Pol, expecting no other answer, whistled softly and withdrew.

To explain madame's reproof it is necessary to state that two or three years previously a gentleman calling himself a count had visited Quilaix, and, charmed with the old-world air of the place, had dwelt in Pol's house for the space of six months.

The handsome profit derived by Pol on this occasion disposed him to look forward to the coming of other visitors: but, alas! Quilaix is too obscure to be mentioned in the ordinary manuals issued for the guidance of tourists. The count's sojourn was an exception to the normal course of events.

Nevertheless Pol would not abandon hope; and, day by day, he awaited the arrival of the diligence, for the purpose of inviting the chance stranger to his own dwelling, before any other person should have the opportunity of appropriating him.

"Everything comes to the man who waits," muttered Pol to himself, as he watched the distant vehicle swaying its zigzag course down the hillside road. "This diligence is perhaps bringing me a visitor. Who can tell?"

Twilight drew on; and, as the lamplighter was preparing the illumination of La Rue Grande by the primitive

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method of fixing an oil-lantern to the middle of a rope slung across the street, the diligence came up, but instead of going on as usual to the *auberge* in the little market square, the driver stopped short in front of Pol's house, and there alighted a young lady accompanied by a little boy, a child of two years.

"Madame Marais lives here?" she asked with an inquiring glance at Pol.

"My wife's name," replied Pol. He pocketed his pipe, doffed his cap, and bowed profoundly. "Permit me to lead you to her. — By the saints," he muttered to himself, "a boarder at last, or may I lose my harbour-mastership. Now, Celestine, it is my turn to laugh at you."

The young lady, holding the child by the hand, followed Pol to the parlour.

"God bless you all, great and small," she said, using the greeting customary in that part of Brittany.

"Heaven bless you, too, stranger, whoever you may be," replied all, as they rose and curtsied.

This intercourse was conducted in the Breton tongue, the guttural voices of Madame Marais and her companions forming a marked contrast with the sweet voice of the stranger.

"Can one have apartments here? The *voiturier* has assured me that one can."

Pol, about to reply with an eager affirmative, was checked by a glance from his more cautious spouse, who was not disposed to give herself away too easily or too cheaply.

"It is not our custom to accommodate visitors," she replied, speaking with great dignity. "At least, not as a rule. But still with a little trouble we might arrange. How many rooms does madame require. Would four be——"

"That number will do. Will you let me see them?"

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After a brief inspection the lady expressed her approval, being especially pleased with the sitting-room, an apartment marked by a charming air of antiquity. The oak flooring and pannelling were black with age. Within the huge fireplace an ox could have been roasted whole. Over the carved mantel was a boar's head, a trophy gained by Pol in a hunting expedition among the Breton hills. On a dark oaken press an ivory crucifix, browned by time, imparted a sort of solemnity to the place.

Terms were arranged; and the lady's luggage was brought in and deposited up-stairs by the strong arm of Pol himself.

"How long is madame likely to remain here?" asked the harbour-master's wife, lingering with her hand on the handle of the sitting-room door.

"Months. Years, perhaps," replied the stranger with a sad smile. "That is," she went on, "if you are willing to let me stay so long."

"And madame's name is ——?"

"Edith Breakspear."

"Breakspear? Then madame is not French?" exclaimed the harbour-master's wife, wondering to what nationality she should ascribe the name.

"No, I am English," said the lady, with a faint touch of pride in her voice.

"Madame speaks the Breton like an angel."

"I have lived a long time in Brittany."

"Ah! madame loves Brittany," said the other, who like all Bretons was intensely patriotic. "The climate reminds her of her own land. We Bretons came from England. Centuries ago. And when we came we brought the weather with us. Is it not so?"

And with these words she smiled herself out of the room, and went down-stairs to discuss the event with her cronies.

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"The English Lady"

"She is going to pay me four Napoleons a week. Think of that now! It is more than the count ever gave. *Ah, ciel!* but if I had been wearing my best Sunday cap with its point lace and gold embroidery I could have asked double. But how could one ask more with only a plain white cap on, and a necklace of blue beads?"

As may be guessed, the coming of a stranger into the little world of Quilaix set the tongues of all the gossips wagging. The men were as much interested as the women, and various were the surmises of the nightly frequenters of the *Auberge des Pécheurs* as to her previous history. But of this they could learn nothing. Mrs. Breakspear let fall no word as to her past, and even Madame Marais' keen eyes failed to penetrate the veil of mystery that undoubtedly hung around "The English lady."

Mrs. Breakspear had not seen more than twenty-one summers; she was in truth so girlish in appearance that the people of Quilaix could scarcely bring their lips to use the matronly "Madame," but more frequently addressed her as "Mademoiselle." It was clear that some secret sorrow was casting its shadow over her young life. Her pale face and subdued air, the sad expression in her eyes, were the visible tokens of a grief, too strong to be repressed or forgotten.

As she was always dressed in black the gossips concluded that she was in mourning, the general opinion being that she had recently lost her husband, though a few ill-natured persons sneered at the word "husband," in spite of her gold wedding-ring.

Mrs. Breakspear made no attempt to form friendships. Firmly, yet without hauteur, she repelled all advances, from whatever quarter they came. She seemed to desire no other companionship than that of her child, Idris. He was evidently the one being that reconciled her to life.

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Thus passed five years: and Mrs. Breakspear, though still as great a mystery as ever to the people of Quilaix, ceased to occupy the chief place in their gossip.

Idris was now seven years old, a handsome little fellow, endowed with an intelligence beyond his years.

His education was undertaken solely by his mother, concerning whom the opinion went, that, in the matter of learning, she was equal, if not superior, to Monsieur le Curé, the only other person in the place with any pretensions to scholarship.

At the back of Quilaix rises the moorland, an extensive wind-swept region, blossoming in early summer with the beautiful broom that furnished our first Plantagenet with his crest and surname. Over this brown, purple-dotted expanse run two white lines intersecting each other in the shape of the letter X. These lines indicate the only two roads over the moor; and, just at the point of intersection, there stands an irregular block of grey stone buildings.

The part of the moorland immediately above the town was the usual place of study, that is, whenever the day was warm and sunny. Then, mother and son would climb to some high point, and seat themselves on the grass; and while the boy, with the breeze of heaven lifting the curls from his temples, would endeavour to fix his eyes on his books, Mrs. Breakspear would fix hers on the grey stone building. Nothing else on land or sea seemed to have any interest for her. The distant and beautiful hills would often change their colour from grey to violet beneath the alternation of sunshine and cloud: ships with their fair sails set would glide daily from the haven of Quilaix; bands of Catholic pilgrims, bound for some local shrine, would occasionally cross the moorland, carrying banners and singing hymns: sea-gulls would wheel their screaming flight aloft: trout leap and

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gleam in the brook at her feet. But Mrs. Breakspear had eyes for none of these things. Her attention, when not given to Idris and his book, was set upon the lone, dun edifice.

On certain days human figures, dwarfed by the distance, would issue from the building, spreading themselves in little groups over the landscape; and, after remaining out some hours, would return upon the firing of a gun. At such times Mrs. Breakspear would clasp her hands and gaze wistfully on the distant moving figures.

One day her emotion was too great to escape the boy's notice: and, following the direction of her eyes, he said, speaking in English, the language used by them when alone:—

"Mother, what are those men doing?"

"They are quarrying stone."

"What for?"

"Well, to make churches with, for one thing," replied the mother, with a curious smile.

"What! churches like that?"

And Idris pointed to the *Chapelle des Pêcheurs*, which glowed in the setting sunlight like sculptured bronze.

"Yes: they quarry the stone and shape it into blocks, which are then sent to Nantes, or Paris, or wherever wanted, and fitted together."

Idris was silent for a few moments, turning the information over in his mind.

"They must be good men to make churches," he presently remarked.

"On the contrary, they are bad men."

Idris was puzzled at this, being evidently of opinion that the character of the work sanctified the workers.

"Then why do they cut stone for churches?"

"Because they are made to do so by other men who watch to see that the work is done."

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Idris becoming more puzzled at this compulsory state of labour, returned to the moral character of the workers.

"Are they *all* bad — every one?"

"No; not all," exclaimed his mother, with an energy that quite surprised the little fellow. "There is one there who is the best, the truest, the noblest of men."

Her eyes sparkled, and a beautiful colour burned on her cheek. She sat with a proud air as if defying the world to say the contrary.

"Is he as good as father was?"

"About the same," replied Mrs. Breakspear, her features softening into a smile.

"Why, you have said that no one was ever so good as father."

"Have I? Well, this man is. There is no difference between them."

"If he is so good, why has he to work among all those bad men?"

"Some day, child, you shall know," replied his mother, folding him within her arms. "Don't ask any more questions, Idie."

"Why doesn't he run away?" persisted the little fellow.

"Because soldiers are there, who would shoot him down if he tried to escape," said Mrs. Breakspear with a shudder. "Come, let us be going. It is growing cold. See how the mist is rising!"

The boom of a distant gun was rolling faintly over the moorland. A fog creeping up from the sea curtained the prison from view as they turned to descend the slope that led to Quilaix.

It was market-day. Buying and selling had now come to an end, but many persons still lingered in the square, chiefly natives from remote districts. "Robinson Crusoes," Idris called them, nor was the name inappropriate.

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"The English Lady"

Clad in garments of goatskin with the hairy side turned outwards, and with long tresses hanging like manes from beneath their broad-brimmed hats, they might have been taken for wild men of the woods: a wildness that was in appearance only, for no one is more tender-hearted than the Breton peasant.

Suddenly there was a movement among them, and it could be seen that they were forming a circle around a man who had just made his appearance. The maidens, who were beating and washing clothes in the stream that flowed along one side of the square, ceased their work and came running up to the circle, their wooden sabots sounding upon the stone pavement.

The cause of all this commotion was a man belonging to a class, formerly more common in Brittany than nowadays, the class called Kloers or itinerant minstrels, who recite verses of their own composing upon any topic that happens to be uppermost in the public mind, accompanying their rude improvisation upon the three-stringed rebec.

"It is André the Kloer," cried Idris gleefully, who had caught a glimpse of the minstrel. "Let us listen. He will tell us some fine stories."

The Kloer having glanced towards the ground at his hat, which contained several sous, said:—

"For your help, friends, many thanks. I will now recite '*The Ballad of the Ring*,' a ballad dealing with a murder that happened some years ago at Nantes."

The minstrel spoke in the language of the province, a language which Idris understood as well as any Breton boy of his own age. The word "murder" gave promise of something exciting. He glanced up at his mother, supposing that she, too, would be equally interested in the coming story: but, to his surprise, he saw that her face had become whiter than usual—that it wore a

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strange look, a look of fear, a look he had never before seen. The hand that held his own was trembling, and, in a voice so changed from its ordinary tone as to be scarcely recognizable, she said:—

"Home, Idie, let us go home."

Suddenly the Kloer paused in the midst of his speaking. A tender expression came over his face; a gentle light shone from his eyes, and with hand solemnly uplifted, he said:—

"Christian brethren, ere we go further let us all say a *Pater* and a *De Profundis* for the assassin as well as for his victim."

In a moment his hearers with spontaneous and genuine piety were kneeling upon the pavement, their heads bowed, their hats doffed, while the Kloer, after making the sign of the cross, began to say the prayers.

As Idris and his mother alone remained standing the attention of the minstrel was naturally drawn to them. No sooner did his eyes fall upon Mrs. Breakspear than a change came over him. His look of solemnity was succeeded by one of wonderment, and after stammering out a few broken phrases, which, though intended as pious petitions to Heaven, conveyed scarcely any meaning to his hearers, he brought his prayer to an abrupt conclusion.

"Good folk," he cried, "I will not give you '*The Ballad of the Ring*.' It is too mournful. It would sadden the hearts of some who are present."

Mrs. Breakspear tightened her grasp on the wrist of Idris, and, much to his grief, drew him away from the presence of the Kloer, and hurried him onward to Pol's house.

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CHAPTER II

THE RUNIC RING

THAT same evening Idris lay reading on the hearth-rug before a bright fire. Since their return from the moorland he had found his mother unusually quiet, and he had therefore turned for companionship to his favourite book, "*The Life of King Alfred.*" Having reared the volume against a footstool he rested his elbows upon the floor, and his chin upon his hands, and in this attitude was soon absorbed in the doings of the Saxon hero.

Suddenly he looked up and addressed his mother, who was sitting in an armchair watching him.

"Mother, what are runes?"

What was there in this simple question to startle Mrs. Breakspear, for startled she certainly was?

"Why do you wish to know? Who has been talking to you about runes?"

"This book says that the Vikings used to carve runes on the prows of their galleys. What *are* runes?"

The mother's face lost its look of alarm, yet it was with some hesitancy that she replied, "They were letters used in olden times by the nations of the north."

"But how could letters carved on the prow protect the vessel?"

What a pair of earnest dark eyes were those fixed that moment upon the mother's face!

"Well, as a matter of fact, they couldn't. But men fancied that they could. They were very superstitious in those days."

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The Viking's Skull

As Idris showed a desire for further knowledge, his mother continued:—"The old Norsemen believed that these letters when pronounced in a certain order would have a magical effect. Some runes would stop the course of the wind: others would cause an enemy's sword to break. Some would make the captive's chains fall off: and others again would cause the dead to come forth from the tomb and speak. But you know, dear Idie, all this is not true. The runic letters have no such power. But the old Norse people believed so much in the virtue of these characters that they engraved them on the walls of their dwellings, on their armour, on their ships, on anything, in fact, which they wished to protect."

"Were these letters like ours in shape?"

"Very different. You would like to see some Norse runes?"

Mrs. Breakspear rose, and going to an oak press produced a small ebony casket, whose exterior was decorated with miniature carvings of Norse warriors engaged in combat.

Seating herself upon the hearth-rug beside the little fellow she unlocked the casket and lifted the lid. Within, upon the blue satin lining, there lay a silver ring, measuring about eight inches in circumference, and obviously of antique workmanship.

"This," said Mrs. Breakspear, "is a very old runic ring."

"How old?"

"More than two thousand years old. Tradition says that it was made by Odin himself. Do you know who he was, Idie?"

"The book calls him an imaginary deity. What does that mean?"

"It means a god who never lived."

"Then how can the ring have been made by Odin if there never was an Odin?"

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"Odin, the god, is, of course, a fable; but Odin, the man, may have had a real existence. He was, so the wise tell us, a warrior, priest, and king of the North, who after death was worshipped as a deity. The legend states that, having made up his mind to die, Odin gave to himself nine wounds in the form of a circle, guiding the point of his spear by this ring, which was laid on his breast for that purpose. The ring thus became sacred in the eyes of his children and descendants: and they showed their reverence for it by using it as an altar-ring in their religious ceremonies. Guthrum, the famous Danish warrior, was of Odin's race, and this is said to have been the identical holy ring, celebrated in history, upon which he and his Vikings swore to quit the kingdom of Alfred."

Idris listened with breathless interest. Guthrum! Alfred! Odin! To think that his mother should possess a ring that had once belonged to these exalted characters! It was wonderful! If the relic were gifted with memory and speech what an interesting story it might unfold!

He turned the ring over in his hands. How massive it was! None of your modern, hollow bangles, but solid and weighty. The ancient silversmith had not been sparing of the metal.

"Oh, couldn't we make a lot of franc-pieces out of it!" cried Idris.

The outer perimeter of the ring was enamelled with purple, and decorated with a four-line inscription of tiny runic letters in gold, so clear and distinct in outline, that a runologist would have had no difficulty in reading them; though whether the characters, when read, would have yielded any meaning, is a different matter.

"Are these the runes?" asked Idris, pointing to them. "What funny looking things! Here is one like an arrow, and here it is again, and again. Why, some of

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them *are* like our letters. Here is one like a B, and here is an R, and an X. What does all this writing mean, mother?"

"No one has ever yet been able to interpret it. When you are older, Idie, you shall study runes, and then perhaps you will be able to explain the meaning."

Idris knitted his little brows over the inscription as if desirous of solving the enigma there and then, without waiting till manhood's days.

"Did Odin engrave these letters?" he asked.

"He may have done so. He is said to have been the inventor of runes, you know."

As Idris turned the ring around in his hand his eye became attracted by a broad, black stain on the inner perimeter.

"What is this dark mark?"

His mother hesitated ere replying:—

"It is perhaps a blood-stain."

"Why isn't it red like blood?"

"A blood-stain soon turns black. I have said that this was an altar-ring. Let me tell you what is meant by that. You know if you go into *La Chapelle des Pêcheurs* you will see upon the altar a — what, Idie?"

"A crucifix," was the prompt reply.

"Well, if you had gone into any temple of the Northmen — and their temples were often nothing more than a circle of tall stones in the depth of a forest — you would have seen on their altar a large silver ring. And just as Catholics nowadays kiss a crucifix and swear to speak the truth, so in old Norse times men employed a ring for the same purpose. Before they took the oath the ring was dipped in the blood of the sacrifice. Then if a man broke his word it was believed that the god to whom the sacrifice had been offered would most surely punish him."

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The Runic Ring

The book that Idris had been reading contained an account of the Norse mode of sacrificing: and so with his eye still on the dark stain, he said:—

"Mother, didn't the old Norsemen sometimes offer up men on their altars?"

"Sometimes they did."

"Then this stain may be a man's blood?"

"It is very likely."

"Perhaps the very blood of Odin, made when he gave himself the nine wounds," said Idris, in a tone of glee, and fascinated by the ring, as children often are fascinated by things gruesome. "What a long time the stain has lasted! But it can't be Odin's blood," he continued, with an air of mournfulness: "the stain would have worn off long ago.—I *would* like to know whose blood it is!"

"Hush! Hush! We do not yet know that it *is* human blood. Come, you must not talk any more about such dreadful things."

And sensible that the conversation had taken a turn not at all suited to a tender mind, Mrs. Breakspear tried to divert his thoughts. Putting away the altar-ring, she seated herself beside him, and drawing him partly within her embrace, she said, "Now what shall I talk about?"—which was her usual preface when beginning his instruction in history, geography, and the like.

"Tell me about Vikings—*all* about them," he replied with the air of one capable of taking in the whole cycle of Scandinavian lore.

As Mrs. Breakspear had made a study of Northern history, she was able to gratify her little son's request by regaling him with a variety of tales drawn from Icelandic sagas and early Saxon chronicles. For more than two hours Idris sat entranced, listening to the doings, good and bad, of the famous sea-kings of old.

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The Viking's Skull

"I wish," he cried, when his mother had finished her stories for the night, "I wish *I* were a Viking, like *Mr.* Rollo and *Mr.* Eric the Red. It would be fine."

For several days Idris would listen to no history that did not relate to Vikings. He took likewise to drawing Norse galleys from his mother's description of them, giving to every vessel the orthodox raven-standard, dragon-prow, and a row of shields hung all around above the water-line. And he somewhat startled the good Curé of Quilaix, who had made a morning-call upon Mrs. Breakspear: for when told to hand the reverend gentleman a glass of wine, he held the drink aloft with the cry of "Skoal to the Northland, skoal!" adding immediately afterwards, "Runes! runes! I wish some one would teach me how to read runes. Won't you, monsieur?"

Runes! Monsieur le Curé had had a reputation for scholarship once upon a time: but thirty years incessantly spent in doing good among the people of his parish had left him so little time for study that he could now read his Greek Testament only by the aid of the French translation.

"And why do you wish to learn runes, my little man?" he said, patting the boy on the head.

"Because — because ——" began Idris; but, observing that his mother was pressing her finger upon her lip as a sign for him to be silent, he stopped short, and Mrs. Breakspear adroitly turned the conversation to other matters. After the departure of the Curé, she said: —

"Idie, you must never let any one know that we have that runic ring in our possession."

"Why not?" he asked in surprise.

"Because there are men who desire to lay their hands upon it, and if they learn that it is in this house they may try to steal it; nay, will perhaps kill us in order to

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obtain it. The ring has been the cause of one murder, and if you speak of it out of doors it may be the cause of another. Remember, then, you must not mention the ring to any one. Remember, remember!"

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CHAPTER III

A RETROSPECT

IDRIS slept in a room the window of which, being a dormer one, overlooked the roofs of the other houses, and gave him an interrupted view of the sea.

One morning, as soon as he had drawn the curtain, he came running to his mother's room with the news:—

"Oh, mother, come and look. There's a pretty little ship in the bay."

So, to please him, Mrs. Breakspear stepped from her *lit clos*, or cupboard bed, and stole, even as she was, in her night-robe, to take a view of the vessel.

"See, there it is," cried Idris, excitedly pointing it out. "Is it a Viking ship, mother?"

"There are no Vikings nowadays," was the reply, a reply which Idris took as a proof of the degeneracy of the times. "It is a yacht."

As this term conveyed no more enlightenment to Idris' mind than if she had said that it was a quinquereme, he naturally asked, "What is a yacht?"

The explanation was deferred till breakfast-time, when his mother entered into the meaning of the term. Idris made a somewhat hasty meal, being eager to run off to the quay for the purpose of taking a nearer view of the newly-arrived vessel.

Dancing down the stairs of the old house into the street he made for the end of the stone pier, and sitting down at the head of the steps he took a long survey of the yacht, wondering whether it equalled in point

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of swiftness and beauty the famous *Long Serpent* of Olaf, built by that master-shipwright, Thorberg.

A boat was rapidly making its way from the vessel to the harbour. Idris recognized it as the revenue-cutter, at the tiller of which sat Old Pol himself.

"Ha! Master Idris," he said, as soon as he had mounted the stairs, "what a pity you were not out an hour earlier! You could then have gone with us to yon vessel." And then, turning to those who had accompanied him, he remarked: "So Captain Rochefort is the owner of that yacht. Well, everybody has heard of him: one of the bravest in the Emperor's service, and an officer of the Legion of Honour. Nothing wrong with that craft, eh, Baptiste?"

"Humph!" growled the man addressed, a grizzled old coastguard with a saturnine cast of countenance. "So they have put Captain Rochefort ashore at Port St. Remé, and he is coming on foot to Quilaix. But if the Captain wants to visit Quilaix, why does he not come with the yacht, instead of walking over the moorland?"

"Why, Baptiste, you talk like one who is suspicious," remarked Pol in surprise.

"And I *am* suspicious. There's something wrong in the wind. Harbour-master, listen to me. As everybody in Quilaix is going to the Pardon to-day the town will be deserted until a late hour. The night will be dark, as this is the time of no moon. Captain Rochefort has been put ashore in order to signal the favourable moment. They are going to run a cargo."

This statement was received by Pol with a burst of laughter.

"Baptiste, you talk like a fool. What cargo can such a small craft carry? Besides, they have no cargo. Did we not overhaul her thoroughly? Captain Rochefort a contrabandist! A military officer hazard his reputation

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in a smuggling venture! Impossible! He would have everything to lose and nothing to gain by such a course."

Baptiste, by a shake of his head, implied that he was not to be moved from his opinion.

"Very well, Baptiste, since you are so suspicious, we had better put you on the watch for the next twenty-four hours."

"I intend to watch, whether put on or not. And by the key of Saint Tugean I shall have discovered something before to-morrow morning comes."

"Undoubtedly. You will discover that you would have acted more wisely by going with us to the Pardon to-day. That's the ticket for me. Life is sad: then let us not miss any of its gaieties. And in all Finistére there are no pancakes and cider like those of St. Remé."

The rest of the coastguard, murmuring their approval of these sentiments, dispersed in order to prepare for the Pardon, or church-festival, to be held that day in a distant village; of which festival the harbour-master's wife had, on the previous evening, drawn so pleasant a forecast in the hearing of Idris, that the little fellow had felt great disappointment on learning that his mother intended to take no part in the celebration.

Madame Marais had been somewhat troubled by the question as to how her tenant's meals were to be prepared during her absence, but Mrs. Breakspear had solved this difficulty by offering to arrange for herself.

Meantime Idris, still at the head of the pier-steps, continued his survey of the vessel.

A piece of canvas hanging over the taffrail was suddenly drawn up by a sailor on board, an act that enabled Idris to see the name of the yacht painted in big black letters.

N-E-M-E-S-I-S.

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A Retrospect

Nemesis! This was a word new to him. He had known sailors call their boats *Marie*, *Isabelle*, *Jeanne*, and the like, with various epithets prefixed, as *jolie*, *belle*, and *petite*, but never *Nemesis*. He could not tell whether it was the name of man or woman: so, on returning home, he sought enlightenment of his mother.

"It's a curious name to give to a ship," commented the little fellow thoughtfully, after Mrs. Breakspear had tried to explain the meaning of the term. "Why do they call it that? Are they going to take vengeance on somebody?"

Shortly afterwards Madame Marais came out of her house, wearing the wonderful lace cap that had descended to her through several generations. Leaning upon the arm of Old Pol, who was likewise gorgeously arrayed, she moved off in great state to take her place in the line of the procession which, under the direction of Monsieur le Curé, was slowly forming before the porch of *La Chapelle des Pécheurs*.

When all preliminaries had been satisfactorily completed, the simple-hearted peasants, with flags flying and pipes playing, set off on their pilgrimage, walking at a somewhat leisurely pace, for your true Breton is seldom in a hurry.

Idris, regretting that he could not accompany them, clambered to an eminence on the moorland, where, aided by his mother's opera-glasses, he watched the course of the procession till it faded from view.

Nearly everybody in Quilaix had gone off to this Pardon. All the shops were closed, and the town was as silent as on a Sunday morning during the time of high mass. A few of the fishermen and of the coast-guard had indeed remained behind, but these were slumbering in the shadow of the sardine-boats drawn high up on the beach. From these slumberers must be

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excepted old Baptiste Malet, who throughout the day glided to and fro along the shore, now and then dropping behind a rock to take a scrutiny of the yacht by the aid of a telescope nearly as long as himself.

The *Nemesis* still remained at the point where the anchor had first been cast. She was certainly a mysterious vessel; none of her occupants had come ashore: none could be seen on deck. It was quite clear that for some reason or other the crew shrank from the observation of those on land.

A gala-day it may have been for others, but for Idris it proved a somewhat dull time. His mother seemed too much preoccupied to set him his regular lessons: or perhaps she did not deem it fair to put him to study while others were festively engaged. She sat during the greater part of the day turning over the leaves of a large scrap-book filled with newspaper cuttings — a book which Idris was never permitted to see, Mrs. Breakspear being accustomed, as soon as her readings were ended, to lock the volume within a drawer of the old oak press. She had read these extracts so often as to be able to recite the greater part of them by heart: nevertheless, she continued to con them daily, as if they were quite new to her, though their perusal must have given her pain.

The first of these newspaper extracts was a long article from the journal *L'Éioile de la Bretagne*, worded as follows: —

"Let us review the facts of this remarkable case.

"Eric Marville is a gentleman of English birth who settled at Nantes in the spring of 1866. Of handsome person and polished manners, speaking our language with the ease of a native, and recently married to a rich and beautiful wife, M. Marville soon became a favourite in the higher circles of Nantes society. The Armorique

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Club, the most fashionable of its kind, admitted him to membership. It would have been well had M. Marville never entered the salons of this establishment, since it was here that he first met Henri Duchesne. The latter by all accounts was a professional gamester, though up to the present time nothing dishonourable has been proved in connection with his play.

"From the very first these two men, Eric Marville and Henri Duchesne, for some unknown reason, appear to have been in a state of secret hostility to each other, hostility which finally developed into open rupture. A remark uttered by Marville one evening, and doubtless uttered with no ill intent, on the wonderful luck attending M. Duchesne at cards, was interpreted by the latter as a reflection upon his mode of playing, and he immediately challenged the other to a duel. M. Marville merely shrugged his shoulders with the words:—'It is not the fashion of my countrymen, monsieur, to fight a duel over trifles.' 'Do you call the honour of my name a trifle?' exclaimed Duchesne, at the same time contemptuously flinging a glass of wine in Marville's face.

"In a moment the club was in an uproar, the friends of each striving to keep the two men apart, an object successfully accomplished. All efforts, however, to effect a reconciliation failed, and the two men left the club avowedly enemies.

"The next evening M. Marville was again present at the Amorique Club, but, confining himself to the newspapers and political gossip, took no part in the play that went on. M. Duchesne was likewise present, and entered the lists against M. Montagne, a young lieutenant of Chasseurs. The usual good fortune attended Duchesne, and his opponent having lost all the money upon his person, said:—'I have one more stake, if M. Duchesne does not object to play against it.' And with these

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words Montagne drew forth a large silver circlet having every appearance, according to an antiquary who was present, of being an altar-ring, such as was used in the religious rites of ancient Scandinavia.

"M. Marville, happening to set eyes upon this circlet, became singularly agitated; and, stepping up to the table where the two men were at play, he said, addressing Montagne: 'How came you by that ring?' M. Montagne, absorbed in the play, or perhaps deeming the question an impertinent one, made no reply. The play resulted in the transference of the ring to the pockets of M. Duchesne, who shortly afterwards took his departure. Five minutes later M. Marville likewise quitted the club, and, on being asked by a friend why he left earlier than usual, replied:—'To recover my ring.'

"Two hours afterwards, a *sergent-de-ville*, going his accustomed round, heard cries for help coming from the Place Graslin, and on running to the spot found M. Duchesne lying on the pavement with blood flowing from a wound in the breast. M. Marville was kneeling beside him and calling for help.

"The injured man was at once removed to the adjacent surgery of M. Rosaire, who, upon examination, found that life had fled.

"The body was conveyed to the Préfecture, accompanied by M. Marville, who gave evidence as to the finding of it. His statement amounted to no more than that in walking homewards he had come by accident upon the body of the fallen man.

"The high position held by M. Marville, and his plausible explanation of the situation in which he had been found by the *sergent-de-ville*, prevented the authorities from attaching suspicion to him, and on giving his recognizances to appear when required, M. Marville was allowed to depart.

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"But the investigations carried on next day gave a different turn to the affair. The quarrel at the Armorique Club and the threatening language of the two men were recalled. Marville's remark on leaving the club in the wake of M. Duchesne to the effect that he was going to recover the ring seemed to supply an additional motive for the deed, especially when taken in conjunction with the fact that though M. Duchesne's money and jewellery were untouched the ring itself was missing.

"But the most significant circumstance of all was the finding of the dagger with which the murder had been effected. Shown to M. Lenoir, the well-known dealer in antiquities, whose establishment is in the Rue Crébillon, he identified it as one that had been purchased from him by M. Marville on the morning of the day on which the crime took place. The weapon is an Italian stiletto, one warranted to have belonged originally to the famous bravo, Michele Pezza, better known to frequenters of the opera as Fra Diavolo. M. Lenoir mentioned this circumstance as he handed the weapon to the purchaser, adding:—'It is a dagger that has shed the blood of Frenchmen.'—'And may do so again,' was the singular reply of M. Marville.

"These circumstances seem to justify the arrest of M. Marville, who now stands charged with the murder of M. Duchesne.

"A peculiar feature of the case is the vanishing of the altar-ring. The prisoner declines to make any statement respecting it, and though his house has been searched no trace of it can be discovered."

* * * * * *

Mrs. Breakspear put away the book with a heavy sigh.

"Ah, Eric!" she murmured. "Will your innocence ever be established?"

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CHAPTER IV

TRAGEDY!

MRS. BREAKSPEAR sat by the open casement enjoying the deep beauty of the evening. The air was still and clear, and over the bay hung one star sparkling in a sapphire sky.

Idris, seated with her, had eyes for nothing but the yacht *Nemesis*, which still lay out in the offing, rising and falling with the motion of the tide, and showing a tiny light at the stern.

"Look, mother!" he cried suddenly. "They are putting out a boat."

By the faint starlight they could see in the boat seven men, one of whom steered while the rest rowed. Their garb was that of ordinary French seamen, but Mrs. Breakspear noticed with surprise that each was armed with cutlass and pistol.

"Why are they not coming to the harbour?" asked Idris, a question which found an echo in his mother's mind.

The boat glided smoothly on, and finally vanished behind the cliffs to the east of the town.

"I wonder whether old Baptiste is watching them?" said Idris. "He said that the men in the yacht were smugglers, and that they would come ashore this evening. And sure enough they've come."

"If the men in that boat are smugglers, don't you think, Idie, that they would wait till it is much darker?"

Idris was forced to admit the reasonableness of this remark.

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"Why are they all wearing swords? Perhaps they *are* Vikings, after all?" he went on, loth to believe that such heroes had vanished from the earth.

His mother shook her head in mild protest, not knowing that there was a good deal of latter-day Vikingism in the enterprise that was taking these seven men ashore.

Now as Mrs. Breakspear sat in the silence and solemnity of the deepening twilight she became subject to a feeling the like of which she had never before experienced. A vague awe, a presentiment of coming ill, stole over her; and, yielding to its influence, she resolved, before it should be too late, to carry out a purpose she had long had in mind.

"Idie," she said, closing the casement and moving to the fireplace, "come and sit here. I have something to tell you."

Wondering much at her grave manner the little fellow obeyed.

"Idie," she began, "you have been taught to believe that your father died when you were an infant. I have told you this, thinking it right that you should know nothing of his sad history. But, sooner or later, you are sure to hear it from others: told, too, in a way that I would not have you believe. Therefore it is better that you should hear the story from me: and remember to take these words of mine for your guidance in all future years: and if men should speak ill of your father, do not believe them: for who should know him better than I, his wife?"

She paused for a moment: and Idris, new to this sort of language, made no reply.

"Idie, your father is *not* dead."

Idris' eyes became big with wonder.

"Then why doesn't he live with us?" he asked.

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"Because," replied his mother, sinking her voice to a whisper, "because he is in prison."

As prison is a place usually associated with crime, Idris naturally received a shock, which his mother was not slow to perceive.

"Idie, you know something of history, and therefore you know that many a good man has found himself in prison before to-day."

"O yes: there was Sir Walter Raleigh, and that Earl of Surrey who was a poet: and — and — I can't think of any more at present, but I can find them in the book."

"Well, your father, like many others in history, is suffering unjustly."

"What do they say he did?"

"They say," replied his mother, once more sinking her voice to a whisper, "they say he committed murder. But he did not: he did not: he did not. I have his word that he is innocent. I will set his word against all the rest of the world."

"How long is he to remain in prison?"

"He is never to come out," replied Mrs. Breakspear; and, unable to control her emotion, she burst into a fit of sobbing.

Idris, touched by the sight of his mother's grief, began to cry also. Now for the first time he understood why his mother so often wept in secret. How could men be so cruel as to take his father away from her and to shut him up in prison for a crime he had not committed?

"Why didn't they put him under the guillotine?" he asked, when his fit of crying was over.

A natural question, but one that caused his mother to shiver.

"Do not use that awful word," she said. "He was condemned to death, but the sentence was afterwards changed."

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Certain past events were now seen by Idris in a new light.

"Mother, I know in what prison father is. It is the one on the moorland over there," he exclaimed, indicating the direction with his hand.

"You are right, Idie: and now you know why I live at Quilaix. It is that I may be near your father. I am happier here — if indeed I may use the word happy in speaking of myself — than in any other place. I have a beautiful house at Nantes, but I cannot live there in ease and luxury while your father is deprived of everything that makes life bright. Now listen, Idie, for I am going to require of you a solemn promise. Since your father did not commit the murder it is certain that some one else did. I want you to find that man."

"I, mother?"

"Of course I do not mean now. In after years. When you are a man."

"But supposing the murderer should be dead?"

"You must find him, living or dead: if living, you must bring him to justice: if dead, you must show to the world that your father was guiltless of the deed. He himself, confined as he is within prison walls, can do nothing to establish his innocence: and as for me, I have the feeling that I shall not live long. Grief is shortening my days. To you, then, I leave this task: to it you must devote your whole life. You will be spared the necessity of having to earn your living, since you are well provided for. But though health, strength, and fortune be yours, you will find these advantages embittered by the constant thought, 'Men think me the son of a murderer!' Will you let the world do you this injustice? Will you not try to clear your father's memory? Will you not ever bear in mind your mother's dearest wish?"

Moved by her earnestness Idris gave the required

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promise, consoling himself over the present difficulty of the problem by the thought that it would perhaps seem easier in the days to come.

"You have not forgotten the story we read the other day," continued his mother, "of the great Hannibal; how, when he was a boy his father, leading him to the altar, made him swear to be the lifelong enemy of Rome? You, too, must make a similar oath. Bring me the Bible."

Idris brought it, and at his mother's command laid his hand upon a page of the open Book, and repeated after her the following words:—

"I swear on reaching manhood to do my best to establish my father's innocence. May God help me to keep this oath!"

"Say it again, Idie."

Idris accordingly repeated the vow, feeling somewhat proud in thus imitating the Carthaginian hero.

His mother brushed back the curls from his forehead and looked earnestly into his eyes.

"Little Idris! little Idris!" she murmured. "Am I acting foolishly? I am forgetting that you are only seven years of age — scarcely old enough to understand the meaning of what you have just uttered. No matter: when you are older, if you are a true son, as I feel sure you will be, you will not require the memory of this oath to teach you your duty. And now I will tell you the story of the murder, and why your father came to be suspected of —— Ha! what is that?" she gasped, breaking off abruptly. "Listen! O, Idie, who is it?"

They had believed themselves to be alone in the house. Mrs. Breakspear, before retiring to this sitting-room, had made fast the outer doors as well as the lower windows. In such circumstances, therefore, it was alarming to hear footsteps ascending the staircase — footsteps which Mrs.

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Breakspear instinctively felt to be those of a man, and not of a woman; footsteps, not of Old Pol, but of a stranger! How had he gained access to the house, and what was his object?

The unknown visitor had mounted to the head of the staircase and was now advancing along the passage leading to the room in which Mrs. Breakspear sat. Unable to speak from surprise and fear mother and son gazed at the door with dilated eyes as if expecting to see some awful vision.

The door was pushed open, and Mrs. Breakspear could scarcely suppress a scream at sight of the man who entered, for his face was hidden behind a black silk vizard, such as might be worn at a *bal masqué*, and through the holes of the vizard two eyes could be seen sparkling, so it seemed to Mrs. Breakspear, with a sinister expression. A low-crowned soft hat covered his head; and a cloak, reaching to his heels, completely concealed his person.

He came forward a few paces, glancing round the room as he did so, and seeming to derive satisfaction from the fact that it contained no persons more formidable than a woman and a child.

"You are alarmed, madame, but without reason," he began. "It is not my purpose to do you hurt—" he paused for a moment, and then added, "unless your obstinacy should call for it."

The man's voice was altogether strange to Mrs. Breakspear. He spoke in French, but with an accent that somehow impressed her with the belief that he was an Englishman: one, too, accustomed to move in good society.

"The first fact I would impress upon your mind is this," continued the stranger, "that you are alone, unprotected, in my power absolutely. If you raise your

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voice there is no one either in the house or in the street to hear you. The town is practically deserted. All are gone to the Pardon, a fact I have taken into my calculations. If you will reflect upon this, it may facilitate my errand."

These words, and the tone in which they were spoken, did not tend to allay Mrs. Breakspear's fears. With difficulty she gathered voice to speak.

"Who are you?"

A smile appeared beneath the fringe of the silken vizard.

"This mask is sufficient proof that I wish to conceal my identity."

"What do you want?"

"A more sensible question than your first, since it brings us to the point at once. I require, nay, I demand of you, the Norse altar-ring now in your keeping."

"What reason have you for supposing that it is here?" said Mrs. Breakspear, growing bolder.

"Do not equivocate." The eyes in the mask flashed like polished steel. "I know it to be in your possession. Do you deny it?" Mrs. Breakspear was silent. "You do not deny it? Good! The ring being here, I demand it."

"Why do you want it?"

"I decline to be catechised. Give me the ring."

"You are evidently a gentleman by education, if not by birth." The stranger gave a start at this. "And yet you seek to act the part of a common thief, a part you would not dare act," she cried with spirit, "were I a man, and not a defenceless woman."

The man shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I did not come to listen to moral vapourings, but to receive the ring."

"And what if I refuse to comply with your demand?"

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"You are alone, let me repeat, and absolutely at my mercy."

A dagger flashed from beneath his cloak. With a cry Mrs. Breakspear clasped Idris in her arms to shield him from a possible attack. Yet even amid her fear it did not escape her notice that the hand which held the weapon was small, white, and decorated with a diamond ring.

"Listen to the voice of prudence," continued the stranger. "It is within my power to despatch you both, and to search these apartments for the ring which you admit is somewhere here. I am quite prepared to go to that extreme rather than return without it. You will, therefore, see the wisdom of surrendering the ring: you thus save your life and that of your child: I save time and trouble—an arrangement mutually advantageous."

Something in his tone convinced Mrs. Breakspear that he was quite capable of carrying out his threat.

"You will find the ring in an ebony case in the top drawer of that cabinet. Take it: and if it should bring upon you the curse which it has brought upon me and mine, you will live to rue this day."

The man smiled, put up his weapon, walked towards the oak press, and in a moment more the casket was in his hands.

"Yes, this is it," he murmured in a tone of satisfaction, as he drew the ring from the case, and scrutinized the runic inscription.

"May one ask," he continued, concealing the relic upon his person, "how you came to deny all knowledge of it at the trial of your husband?"

"I spoke truly," she answered, "being unaware at the time that my husband had secretly entrusted it to the care of his friend, Captain Rochefort."

"After stealing it from the body of his victim," added the stranger.

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"His victim? There you err," cried Mrs. Breakspear with flashing eyes, loathing to answer the stranger, yet eager to vindicate her husband. "When my husband left the Armorique Club on that fatal evening he overtook M. Duchesne on his way home, and upon the latter's expressing regret for his violence of the preceding night a reconciliation took place. As a pledge of amity M. Duchesne, remembering the interest my husband had shown in the ring, made him a present of it: in return my husband insisted that Duchesne should accept the antique poniard purchased by him that morning. Thus they parted: the one with the ring, the other with the dagger. The assassin, whoever he was, that attacked Duchesne, must, during the struggle, have become possessed of the dagger, and with it he inflicted the fatal wound. Next morning, my husband, foreseeing that he might be accused of the murder, and aware that his possession of the ring would seem a suspicious circumstance, handed it to Captain Rochefort, enjoining him, very unwisely as I now perceive, to keep silent on the matter."

"And so," commented the stranger, "Captain Rochefort conspired to defeat the ends of justice."

"The word justice comes with an ill grace from the lips of a coward and a thief," retorted Mrs. Breakspear, her spirit rising, as it always rose, whenever her husband's innocence was put to the doubt. "Say, rather, that in concealing the ring Captain Rochefort was seeking to prevent the Law from drawing an erroneous conclusion."

"He failed, however," sneered the stranger, "for the Law pronounced your husband guilty — greatly to my interests. A pity they didn't guillotine him! Still, he is in prison: there let him rot! and—— Ah!" he muttered in a hoarse voice, breaking off abruptly. "In the name of hell, what's that?"

He could not have been a very brave man, Idris

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thought, for he seemed unable to keep his hand which rested on the table from shaking.

All three were silent, listening for a renewal of the sound. It soon came — a dull boom slowly rolling through the air like distant thunder.

With the air of one mad the stranger dashed to the window, and flinging wide the casement looked out into the night, a night of glory and beauty, such as is seldom seen in misty Brittany. The air from horizon to zenith was alive with countless stars that seemed to float like silver dust in the blue depth. Their faint light falling over a wide expanse of rippling sea, and on a long arc of yellow sand terminated at each end by dark cliffs, formed a picture that would have charmed the eye of an artist.

Idris, his curiosity getting the better of his fear, slipped from his mother's embrace, and, stealing to a second casement, looked through its latticed panes.

On the water was the boat he had noticed earlier in the evening, the boat that had been put out from the yacht. If its occupants had gone ashore for the purpose of taking some one aboard they had failed in their object, since the boat contained the same seven sailors. They were evidently in a state of perplexity: for, without any apparent motive, they were rowing backwards and forwards in a line parallel with the shore, the steersman now and then standing up and sweeping the coast with a night-glass.

Turning his eyes upon the yacht Idris saw jets of black smoke issuing from the funnel. The engineer was evidently getting up steam.

Here, thought Idris, was the explanation of the booming sound. The yacht was about to weigh anchor, and had fired a gun as a signal of departure.

The masked man, however, did not seem to think that the sound came from the yacht. With his body half out

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of the window he was staring at the plateau of brown moorland with its faint silvery crown — staring as if behind that white mist some exciting event were happening that he would fain witness.

Once more came the dull, rolling reverberation, and at that sound the man reeled from the window as if buffeted by a giant hand.

"Damnation! he has escaped," he hissed between his set teeth. "Is this their vigilance, after being warned of the plot? But my enemy shall not escape. I'll join in the chase myself. That gun invites pursuit. It is lawful," and here a sinister smile appeared beneath the fringe of his mask, "it is lawful to shoot a fugitive convict."

With that he darted from the room and dashed down the staircase: the slamming of a door followed, and the next moment his tread could be heard going up the street in the direction of the moorland prison.

The indignation felt by Mrs. Breakspear at the theft of the ring became lost in a new emotion. A convict had escaped, and the stranger's words seemed almost to imply that the fugitive was — her husband! She strove to banish this idea as a wild fancy, as a too daring hope on her part, but it would persist in forcing itself upon her. With her hand pressed to her side she sat, powerless to speak, trembling at the thought that at that very moment Eric Marville might be fleeing over the misty moorland with armed warders in close pursuit eager to bring him down with a carbine shot.

"Hark! there goes another gun," cried Idris. "Who is it that is firing, and why are they doing it?"

Something else besides the gun was now heard. Along the lonely and usually silent road that led down from the moorland to Quilaix came a sound, which, at first faint and undistinguishable in character, became gradually more distinct, and finally developed into the thud-thud

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of horse-hoofs, accompanied by the noise of wheels rattling madly forward as if speed were a matter of life and death to the driver of the vehicle.

Louder and ever louder grew the sound of the galloping horse-hoofs; they descended the moorland: they reached the outskirts of the town: they came plunging up the Rue Grande, and at last the wild race was brought to a sudden standstill in front of the harbour-master's door.

Idris, looking from the window, saw in the street below a light gig, and in it a man of soldierly aspect, who was holding the reins with a tight hand and using his best endeavours to keep the panting and steaming mare steady in order to facilitate the descent of a second man.

"For God's sake, Eric, make haste," cried the one in the gig, with a backward glance. "They can't be far behind us."

The man to whom these words were spoken delivered a succession of knocks at the street-door, the loud, imperative knocks of one whose errand will brook no delay.

Without waiting for his mother's bidding Idris flew down the stairs eager to learn the meaning of this strange summons.

On opening the door he found on the threshold a man draped from neck to ankles in a grey ulster, a man who acted in a very strange way, for he lifted Idris completely off his feet and kissed him several times.

Now Idris, though not at all averse to the kisses of his mother or of the fishermen's daughters, had an objection to the kisses of a man, and especially of a strange man, and he struggled to be free.

"Where's your mother?" cried the stranger, setting Idris down.

"She's up there," answered Idris, indicating the staircase. "But you'd better not kiss her. She won't like it."

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The man gave a joyous laugh.

"Won't she? Well, let us see," was his answer, and he darted swiftly up the staircase, first calling out to the man in the gig:—

"See to the boy, Noel."

"Now, my little man," said the military gentleman, "jump up here. You are going for a sail in that pretty ship yonder in the bay."

Idris' eyes sparkled at this enchanting prospect.

"But I can't go without my mother."

"Oh, she's coming too; your father as well."

"My father?" laughed Idris. "Why, my father is in ——"

He checked the word "prison" upon his lips, and substituted for it the euphemism, "Over there."

"By God! that's where he'll be again, unless he hurries," cried the military gentleman. "That's your father who has just run up-stairs."

His father up-stairs! The day had been a succession of surprises to Idris, and this was the climax of them all. He had never known such an exciting time. Deaf to the gentleman's command to ascend the vehicle he turned and scampered hastily up to his mother's sitting-room, where he beheld a sight that struck him dumb.

The stranger was standing in the middle of the room with Mrs. Breakspear in his arms, her cheek pillowed on his breast.

"Eric, O, Eric!" she murmured: and the pure joy of that moment transfigured her face with the light and beauty of an angel's.

"Edith, my sweet wife!" cried the man pressing her lips to his. "This kiss is a compensation for all I have suffered. There! you mustn't faint. Why, here's our boy. What a fine fellow he is becoming! Well, Idris, what do you think of your father and his court dress?"

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Idris' face fell as he surveyed the newcomer. This man with his close-cropped head, grimy visage, stubbly beard, and half-savage air, his father! Beneath the grey ulster there peeped out the prison livery, clad in which garb divine Apollo himself would lose all grace and majesty.

Eric Marville was not slow to read the thoughts of his little son, and he smiled grimly.

"Upon my word, he stares as if I were some wild animal. I verily believe I am: prison life grinds every trace of the godlike out of a man. — But come, Edith, we haven't a moment to lose. You can hear that they have discovered my escape," he continued, as another boom rolled over the moorland. "Rochefort was for hurrying me on board his yacht at once, but it wasn't likely that I would leave you and the boy behind, when you were so close at hand. Come, Edith and Idris, wife and son, come! Away to a new life in a new land!"

At that moment there came from without the warning voice of Captain Rochefort.

"Marville! Marville," he roared. "Look to yourself. They're here."

As he spoke quick footsteps came clattering over the pavement of the Rue Grande, and the ping-ping of carbine shots rang out on the night-air. The bullets were intended for the Captain, but missed their mark; and the mare taking fright at the report set off at a gallop, followed by the pursuers, who were on foot.

"Halt!" shouted an authoritative voice. "Let the car go; that's not the quarry. Our man's in here; this is his wife's abode. Through the house, two of you, and guard the rear. Two of you watch the front. Leave the rest to me. I'll unearth him."

The man who gave these commands rushed through the doorway of the harbour-master's dwelling, and, as if

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guided by instinct, neglected the lower storey and made his way up the staircase.

All this took place so quickly that Marville was for the moment paralyzed with surprise, and stood motionless and silent, with his scared wife clinging to him.

"Don't make any resistance, Eric, dearest," she pleaded.

"It will be better not."

Springing from his lethargy Marville put aside the arms of his wife and made for the open window, only to perceive two watchful gendarmes in the street below, who instantly levelled their carbines at sight of the convict's face.

The only other outlet from the room was through the doorway: but there, framed within the entrance and pistol in hand, stood a grey-haired, fine looking veteran, clad in military uniform, Duclair, governor of the prison, who, alive to his responsibility, had himself joined in the chase.

"Run to earth," he said, with a grim smile. "You're fairly cornered. It's no use resisting."

"We'll see about that," muttered Marville, pulling forth a revolver — a recent gift of Rochefort's — with the intention of forcing his way over the disabled or dead body of the governor.

"Drop that, or by ——" and Duclair punctuated the sentence with the significant raising of his own weapon.

Seeing the pistol levelled Mrs. Breakspear, with uplifted arms, flung herself forward to shield her husband.

Simultaneously with her movement came a deadly click from Marville's weapon, followed instantly by a loud bang. The report was accompanied by a cry of "Ah! Eric!" and by the fall of a body — sounds that sent a cold thrill to the hearts of those who heard them.

There, amid faint wreaths of bluish smoke, lay Mrs. Breakspear, prostrate on the carpet, her forehead dis-

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figured by a spot from which came the slow ooze of blood.

"O, you have shot my mother!" wailed Idris, casting a look of anguish at his father.

The little fellow dropped on his knees beside her, but it was only a piece of clay upon which he now gazed: his mother was gone forever: was as much a part of the past as the dead Cæsars of history. Dread change, and all the work of a moment!

"Edith! my wife! O God, I have killed her!"

Dropping the weapon Eric Marville staggered forward to lift up the dead form and implore forgiveness from her who was beyond power to grant it, but ere he could reach the fallen figure, strong hands were laid upon him, and a pair of steel manacles was clasped upon his wrists.

"*Mon Dieu!* who has done this?" cried one of the gendarmes, appalled at the sight.

"The prisoner," responded the governor. "Take notice, all of you, that my weapon is undischarged."

The gendarmes lifted the silent form and laid it upon a couch, and there Idris knelt, sobbing bitterly and calling upon his mother to speak.

"My poor boy," said the governor, after a brief inspection of the body, "she will never speak again. — We ought," he added, turning to address his men, "we ought to send for a doctor, though he can do no good, for she is stone dead."

There was but one doctor in Quilaix, and he, Idris explained amid his tears, had gone with the procession to the Pardon.

"We must have some woman to attend to the body," continued Duclair. "We can't return to Valàgenêt leaving the boy alone with a corpse. Surely all the women folk haven't gone to this cursed Pardon?"

Idris, as well as his grief would let him, explained

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where a woman was likely to be found, and a gendarme was at once despatched to fetch her.

The man who had done the deed offered now no resistance to his captors. His desire for liberty had fled. Overwhelmed by the awful result of his own act he had sunk into a stupor, staring with glassy eyes at that which but a few minutes before had been a living woman.

Touched by the spectacle of his grief they allowed him to sit beside her; and, as he showed a desire to clasp her hand, the governor made a sign to one of the party to remove the manacles.

This done, he sat holding the limp fingers within his own, pressing them as if expecting the pressure to be returned.

The gendarmes stood aloof in pitying silence. Not even the governor spoke, feeling the emptiness of any attempt at consolation.

As for Idris, he shrank, not unnaturally, from the man who had killed his mother. Once he addressed to him a piteous reproach: — "Oh, why did you come here? — Oh, mother, mother, speak to me!"

Absorbed in his own grief, however, the man did not hear, or, at least, did not reply to this plaint. It was a melancholy scene, and the men awaited with secret impatience the coming of the woman to end the oppressive spell.

The silence was broken by the prisoner himself. All bent forward to listen, but the words spoken conveyed no intelligible meaning to his hearers. For, in a cold, mechanical voice, that sounded like the monotone of a mournful bell, he murmured over and over again: —

"The curse of the runic ring! The curse of the runic ring!"

* * * * * *

Next day the Minister of the Interior received the

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following telegram from the Governor of Valàgenêt Prison: —

"Regret to state that convict, Eric Marville, escaped last night, by connivance of warder, bribed by Captain Noel Rochefort, who, with light vehicle, waited at pre-arranged time near prison. Owing to mist, two men some time in meeting, thus enabling pursuers to overtake them at 6, Rue Grande, Quilaix. Here Marville, resisting capture, accidentally shot his wife dead. Prisoner conveyed back to Valàgenêt under guard of four gendarmes. On lonely part of moor escort assailed by Rochefort and six men. Suddenness of attack and numerical superiority enabled assailants to effect rescue. Prisoner carried off, presumably, on board *Nemesis*, as she steamed off immediately afterwards."

END OF PROLOGUE

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I

THE RAVENGARS OF RAVENHALL

THE Ravengars of Ormsby-on-Sea, a town on the Northumbrian coast, come of an ancient stock; for, as students of the Gospel according to St. Burke are aware, the original Ravengar antedates by two centuries that Ultima Thule of heraldry, the Norman Conquest.

Yet, though so ancient a race, one, moreover, that has taken part in all the great events of English History, it was not until the days of the Merry Monarch that the Ravengars entered the charmed and charming circle of the peerage.

At the battle of Naseby that gallant and loyal cavalier, Lancelot Ravengar, contrived to disfigure the face of the great Protector by a sword-cut that left behind it a scar for life. So valuable a service to the State merited right royal recognition. "Something must be done for Ravengar," said the courtiers of the Restoration. That something took the shape of a patent of nobility, a favour the more readily granted by the Monarch, inasmuch as it cost him nothing. So the heretofore plain Lancelot Ravengar became the noble Viscount Walden, and at a later date was advanced to the Earldom of Ormsby, a title derived from the Northumbrian sea-town, whose rents and leases supplied him with the wealth requisite to maintain his dignity.

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The Ravengars of Ravenhall

This Lancelot Ravengar deserves mention, as being not only the first peer of the family, but likewise the originator of a very curious funeral rite instituted by his testamentary authority.

When the Civil War broke out in Charles's days, Ravenhall, the seat of the Ravengars, shared the fate of many other historic mansions: it was besieged by the Puritan soldiery, and notwithstanding a gallant defence, was forced to yield to the foe. Its owner, Lancelot, however, was fortunate enough to escape to a secret subterranean chamber, specially made for such emergencies, where, in addition to the family heirlooms, provisions for many weeks had been stored. The Roundheads, not finding the Cavalier after a long and careful search, concluded that he had fled.

For several days the victors remained at Ravenhall feasting and drinking; and then, larder and wine cellar failing them, they proceeded to plunder and dismantle the place "for the glory of the Lord," and so took their departure.

Now, during this period of hiding, Lancelot, with no companion but a Bible, had ample leisure for meditation. The seclusion became the turning-point in his spiritual life: from that time the hitherto careless Cavalier developed religious tendencies which were not to be shaken by all the gibes of the Merry Monarch.

The place of his conversion naturally became invested with more than ordinary interest in the eyes of Lancelot Ravengar: he spent much of his time there in contemplation and prayer, becoming at last so attached to the spot as to desire it for his place of sepulture.

Accordingly, his last will and testament enjoined that not only his own body, but the bodies likewise of his successors in the earldom should be buried in the secret vault. This rite constituted the condition of an entail,

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inasmuch as neglect on the part of the next of kin to inter his predecessor in this chamber necessitated the forfeiture of the inheritance. The will furthermore directed that the secret ingress to this crypt should not be made known to more than four persons at a time, viz: the then earl, his heir-apparent, the family lawyer, and any fourth person whom these three should choose to take into their confidence.

When an Earl of Ormsby died his body was carried to the mortuary chapel on the estate, where the burial service of the Anglican Church was read. The coffin was then carried back to Ravenhall: all the servants, without exception, were dismissed for the day, and the four executors proceeded to remove the body to the secret crypt.

Such was the singular testament of Lancelot Ravengar, first Earl of Ormsby, and its injunctions were faithfully observed by all his successors in the title.

Some years prior to the events related in the prologue of this story, the dignity of the family was represented by Urien Ravengar, the tenth peer. He was the father of Olave, Viscount Walden, who, as being the only son, and heir to the title and estates, was naturally the object of his father's affection. The old earl did not keep a steward, being content to leave his affairs in the hands of the young viscount, who consequently managed his father's correspondence, all letters addressed to the earl being freely opened by the son.

Then came a memorable day in the annals of the House of Ravengar.

A letter arrived for the Earl bearing the postmark of a town in Kent. Olave, who was passing through the entrance-hall at the time of its delivery, took it from the servant, and, following his usual practice in regard to his father's letters, opened it.

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As he read he was observed to change colour, and to become strangely agitated.

Taking the letter with him he went at once to his father's study.

What passed there no one ever learned, save that there were high words between the two. That in itself was nothing new, the Ravengars being noted for their proud spirit. In the end the study-door was flung open by the earl who, with a face flaming with anger, cried:—

"Leave the house."

Olave, with a scornful glance at his father, obeyed.

He went forth, saying nothing to any one as to the cause of the rupture, making no mention of his destination or plans. Without a word of farewell he disappeared from Ormsby. To all who had known him he became as one dead.

Every Sunday the earl, while at Ormsby, attended the parish church with commendable regularity, but vainly did he try to assume a brave air: it was clear to all that he felt the loss of his son, and that he was aging in consequence.

Five — seven — ten years rolled away, and now the old earl lay dying in his grand bedchamber at Ravenhall. A wild evening had set in, and the herring-fishers, on the point of sailing for the Dogger Bank, put off their expedition for more propitious weather.

The dying man moaned uneasily. His mind was wandering, and he frequently murmured the name of the absent Olave.

Louder and ever louder grew the wind, till at length it arose to a gale. The gloom of night was illumined by vivid lightning-flashes accompanied by peals of thunder. The distant roar of the sea could be plainly heard at Ravenhall. News came that a yacht, supposed to be French, was foundering upon the rocks of Ormsby Race

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in full sight of hundreds of spectators on the beach, who were powerless to give help. None of the servants at Ravenhall, however, felt disposed to go and view the wreck: their master's death, which was hourly expected, affected them far more than the drowning of a hundred strangers. They clustered in the entrance-hall, waiting for the fatal news, and conversing in hushed tones.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, there stalked into the entrance-hall a lofty figure, drenched to the skin, without hat or cloak, his long hair lying wet and lank on his pale cheek.

He looked neither to right nor left, asked no question of the startled servants, but passed quickly up the grand staircase with the air of one to whom the way was familiar, with the air of one, too, who had the right to do as he did. Like the electric flash, he had come and gone in a moment.

"Lord save us!" gasped the butler, a lifelong servitor of the family. "Here's Master Olave come back after all these years!"

Olave it was. He had evidently received some intimation of his father's condition, for he walked to the bedroom where the earl lay dying. To the three persons at the bedside, physician, nurse, and rector, he was a stranger, but his likeness to the patient was sufficiently striking to apprise them at once of the relationship.

The viscount, keeping in the background, addressed himself to the physician.

"How is he?"

"Sinking fast."

"Is his mind clear?"

"Now it is. He wandered earlier in the evening."

"Then leave us, please."

There was something so authoritative in the viscount's manner that the three watchers were constrained to obey.

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What took place in their absence was never known. The interview was of short duration, and ended in a cry from the earl, which brought physician and nurse hurrying into the apartment.

"He is dead," said Olave.

There was no trace of sorrow in his voice, nor, in justice be it added, of satisfaction: a quiet, impassive utterance.

He stood with folded arms till his words had been endorsed by the physician, and then, without so little as a glance at the dead earl, the living earl strode from the apartment.

The nurse closed the eyes of her charge, shuddering as she did so, for the countenance of the dead man was marked by a ferocity of expression which showed that his last feelings were those of hatred.

A rumour soon arose that the old earl had died in the very act of cursing his son. The rumour may have been false, but certain it is that the new earl took no pains to contradict it.

Urien, tenth Earl of Ormsby, was interred according to the rite instituted by the first peer: and the returned Olave, after giving the family solicitor sufficient proof of his identity, assumed his station as master of Ravenhall.

Where he had spent the previous ten years was a mystery to everybody except, perhaps, his lawyer. The earl maintained absolute reticence as to this part of his career, and the sternness of his manner when the question was once put to him by an indiscreet lady, checked all further attempts on the part of the inquisitive.

He somewhat scandalised the good folk of Ormsby by marrying within two months of his father's death the daughter of a neighbouring baronet. His wedded life did not last long. Within a year his wife died, leaving an infant son named Ivar.

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Henceforth the earl remained single.

He had sadly changed from the lively youth whose pranks had been a constant source of merriment to the people of Ormsby.

His long absence had developed a cold and unsympathetic temperament which led him to avoid society; and though he did not refrain from giving an occasional dinner or ball, he was evidently bored by these social offices. He found his greatest pleasure in the seclusion of the magnificent library at Ravenhall. He withdrew himself more and more from the world of men to the world of books.

More than two decades went by, and the mystery which overhung the earl became a thing of the past, was forgotten by the people of Ormsby, or at least was rarely recalled. Gossip occupied itself chiefly with the doings of the earl's only son, Ivar, or to give him his courtesy title, Viscount Walden, who was now in his twentieth year.

To this son the earl appeared much attached: he designed him, so it was rumoured, for the diplomatic service: and to this end Ivar, accompanied by a tutor, was supposed to be travelling on the continent, perfecting himself in foreign languages, and studying on the spot the workings of the various European constitutions.

All the collateral branches of the Ravengars had died out with the exception of one family, and even this was limited to a single person — Beatrice, daughter of Victor Ravengar. This Victor, the earl's cousin in the sixth degree, had taken as his wife a widow with one son, Godfrey by name. Beatrice was the sole issue of this marriage.

The earl was naturally much interested in this little maiden as being next in succession after his son: and

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accordingly when Beatrice became an orphan at the age of sixteen (her parents having died within a month of each other), the earl invited her and her half-brother, Godfrey Rothwell — her senior by seven years — to take up their residence at Ravenhall, offering to settle a handsome annuity upon each.

But to the earl's surprise the favour was declined both by brother and sister. It had happened that Mrs. Victor Ravengar had never been a very welcome visitor at Ravenhall, the marriage having been regarded by the earl as a mésalliance: and though Beatrice was of a forgiving nature, she could not entirely forget sundry slights put upon her mother.

Godfrey was determined not to eat the bread of dependency, and Beatrice, who was devoted to her half-brother, sympathized with him in this feeling, and refused to live apart from him. He had applied himself to the study of medicine, and had lately set up in practice at Ormsby. In Beatrice, Godfrey found a ready assistant. She helped him in his surgery, often accompanied him when visiting his patients, and never hesitated to take upon herself the duty of nurse if occasion required. Hence she was all but worshipped by the people of Ormsby; the earl might take their rents, but Beatrice possessed their hearts, and often was regret expressed that it should be Viscount Walden, and not Beatrice Ravengar, who must succeed to the fair demesne of Ravenhall.

"Absolutely no more patients to visit," remarked Godfrey Rothwell, returning home one afternoon to his neat little villa, called Wave Crest.

"Charming!" said Beatrice, clapping her hands. "It is so long since we had an evening together."

"Humph!" muttered Godfrey, lugubriously. "But we are doomed not to spend it together. We have re-

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ceived an invitation to dine this evening at Ravenhall, where a small and select company is assembling to welcome Master Ivar home. He returns to-night from the continent. The earl's carriage will call for us at six, so we can't very well decline."

Beatrice pouted her pretty lips. Simple in her tastes, unconventional in her habits, she disliked the stately banquets, the funereal grandeur, of Ravenhall. She would not, however, oppose her brother, and that same night found them both within the drawing-room of Ravenhall, conversing with their distant kinsman, the Earl of Ormsby.

He was a man verging upon sixty; his hair and moustache were of an iron grey; his eyes somewhat dimmed by long study; his features fine and striking, but marked by an air of profound melancholy.

He received Godfrey kindly, and made inquiries as to his medical practice, but it was clear to all that his interest centred chiefly in Beatrice, whom he kissed with an old-fashioned courtesy.

Beatrice's figure was small and graceful, and her features, if not precisely regular, were nevertheless very pretty, and rendered more attractive by the sparkling colour and the vivacious expression that played over them. She wore an evening dress of white silk with a cluster of violets at her breast, a diamond star gleaming in her bronzed hair, which was tied in a knot behind in antique Greek fashion. In Godfrey's opinion his sister had never looked more charming than on this evening.

"You have the fairest face in all the county," said the old earl, tenderly stroking her hair. "I wish that Ivar would think so," he added significantly.

It was not the first time that he had given expression to this wish in the presence of Beatrice.

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"Did you notice what he said, Trixie," said Godfrey, when he had found an opportunity of whispering to her. "He wants to see you married to Ivar."

But Beatrice Ravengar tossed her head in scorn.

"No one who has sneered at you, as Ivar has, shall ever be husband of mine, though he bring with him title and lands. It will require some one a good deal better than Ivar to separate you and me, Godfrey," she said, pressing his arm affectionately.

Godfrey felt justly proud of his sister's attachment. How many women, he thought, would willingly have thrown over a poor struggling medico of a brother, and have become wild with joy at the idea of obtaining a coronet and the stately towers of Ravenhall?

Godfrey wondered, and not for the first time, why the earl should desire this match, since Beatrice was portionless, and, therefore, from a worldly point of view, no very desirable alliance for the heir of the Ravengars. Godfrey had never quite taken to the earl: in fact, he had a secret distrust of him, he could not tell why: and he refused to believe that that peer's attitude towards Beatrice was dictated by pure disinterestedness, though it was difficult to see how either the earl or Ivar would be advantaged by the match.

While Godfrey was occupied with these thoughts, the butler appeared with the message that the keeper of the lodge had announced by telephone the arrival of the viscount's carriage at the park-gates.

"Let us give the heir of Ravenhall a welcome at his own portal," said Lord Ormsby, rising; and without delay the company made their way to the grand entrance-hall, where the butler, the housekeeper, and the rest of the servants, were assembled to do honour to the young viscount's return.

On the panelled wall within the Gothic doorway, and

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suspended by a silver chain, was a bugle of ivory, wrought with gold, and decorated with runic letters.

It was a relic of ancient days, credited to have belonged originally to the old Norse chieftain who had founded the House of Ravengar. Owing to the peculiar construction of this bugle some practice was required by those desirous of blowing it. Indeed, it was a family tradition that in former times the only persons gifted with the power of sounding it were the lord of Ravenhall and his immediate heir, all others essaying the feat being foredoomed to failure. Hence, in mediæval times, when the lords of Ravenhall returned from a Crusade, or some other equally protracted war, it was their practice to sound this horn as a guarantee of the legitimacy of their title.

"We will greet the heir in the ancient fashion of our house," cried the earl, a great upholder of the traditional usages of his family. "Pass me the bugle. Jocelyn, the wine!"

The butler, who was standing by, holding a silver tray with a decanter on it, poured some port into the broad funnel-shaped end of the horn, the tight-fitting silver cap over the mouthpiece preventing the emission of the liquid.

"Custom enjoins that a lady should hand the bugle to the returning heir, and wish him welcome," said Lord Ormsby, fixing his eyes on Beatrice.

With some reluctance she accepted the bugle from the hand of the earl, who briefly instructed her — Beatrice being not very well versed in the Ravengar traditions — as to the form of words to be used in this ceremony.

The rattle of wheels was now heard coming along the avenue of chestnuts, and amid murmurs of "Here he is!" from those assembled at the porch, a brougham rolled up. When it had stopped, there alighted a figure,

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fair, slight, and, though youthful, of decidedly *blasé* appearance. He was dressed in a light travelling ulster, and held a cigar between his fingers, throwing it away, however, as soon as he beheld the company.

"Welcome, Ivar," said the earl, warmly returning the clasp of his son's hand: and then, waving him towards Beatrice, he continued, "But one moment: we must not neglect the ancient custom of our house. Now, Beatrice, you know the words."

And Beatrice, holding aloft the horn of wine, in an attitude that displayed all the grace of her figure, approached the young viscount.

"Is it peace, O heir of Ravenhall?"

"It is peace, O lady fair," replied the viscount, using the words of the traditional formula.

"Then drink of thine own, O heir of Ravenhall," continued Beatrice, extending the bugle to him.

"To the souls of the departed warriors," replied Ivar, tossing off the contents at one draught. "Hum! port. Very good liquor for boys; but, I confess, I like my *aliquid amari* stronger."

This last sentence formed no part of the Ravengar ritual, and the earl, who liked everything *en régle*, frowned slightly.

"Now prove thy title, heir of Ravenhall."

"Prove it? Ay, with a blast that shall rival that of the immortal Roland."

Removing the silver cap from the narrow end of the bugle, and placing the mouthpiece to his lips, Ivar blew with all his might. But no sound issued from the horn other than that of a faint soughing. The viscount, surprised at this result, removed the bugle from his mouth, and eyed it curiously. Then, thinking he had perhaps employed too much force, be blew again, but this time more gently.

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The bugle continued silent. The company looked at each other in surprise, tinged with amusement. The earl, however, seemed to take it much amiss. Beatrice found his eyes set upon her, and upon her only, with a look that made her feel uncomfortable, for it somehow conveyed to her mind the idea that he was mentally blaming *her* for his son's failure!

"This is a very serious matter, you know," said the viscount, looking round upon the company with an air of mock gravity. "The ancestral bugle refuses — positively refuses — to acknowledge me as the heir of Ravenhall."

"Try again, Ivar," said the earl.

"Not I. Devil take the bugle," exclaimed Ivar laughing. "Let us read a parable in my failure. In days of old the blast of the horn was the sign of battle; its silence implies that we Ravengars have no longer to vindicate our title by arms. But it permits me to drink, thereby symbolizing that peace and festivity are now to be our lot. Have I not said?" he added, theatrically, turning to his father. "And now, this fantasia being over —— Why? what? is this little Trixie?"

Till that moment he had not recognized Beatrice, so much did she differ from her appearance when last seen by him; but now that recognition came, he stopped short in surprise at her loveliness.

"Trixie!" he repeated.

He bent forward as if to kiss her, but, with quiet dignity, Beatrice drew back, offering her hand.

"What, and must we dispense with the sweet greeting of old days? Nay, then."

And with this he seized her in his arms, and pressed his lips to hers in kisses of a distinctly vinous flavour.

"How dare you?" exclaimed Beatrice, breaking breathlessly and indignantly from his embrace.

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CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY OF THE RELIQUARY

IVAR, with a laugh at Beatrice's indignation, turned his attention to the brougham, apparently with a view of superintending the removal of his *impedimenta*.

"O, never mind your luggage," said the earl, in some surprise. "Jocelyn will see to that."

But Ivar, ignoring the suggestion, was concentrating all his care upon what seemed to be a long box wrapped in a covering of coarse linen. This a footman was bringing into the hall upon his shoulders, and while giving his burden a jerk to place it in a position more easy for carrying, the cloth, by some mischance, became partly ripped open.

A half-smothered exclamation and an angry glance at the awkward footman were eloquently expressive of Ivar's annoyance.

"Eh! what have we here?" said the earl, motioning the bearer to lay down his burden.

He removed the cloth, and all crowded round to admire the richness and beauty of the object thus revealed to view. It was a chest of black wood bound at the corners with silver. The lid and sides were divided into compartments, carved with alto-relievos of a decidedly ecclesiastical character.

"This is a very fine work of art," said Lord Ormsby, who was somewhat of an authority on antiquities. Putting on his *pince-nez* he stooped to examine the chest more closely. "French, I should judge, of the fourteenth century. What wood is it?"

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"Cypress."

Godfrey did not fail to notice Ivar's somewhat sullen intonation.

"And the cypress," remarked the earl, "is the emblem of death. This chest is evidently one of those shrines in which mediæval folk put the relics of their saints."

"Yes, it is a reliquary."

"How did you become its possessor?"

"I bought it from the sacristan of an old church in Brittany. Whence he obtained it is perhaps easy to guess. Naturally I refrained from questioning him too closely."

Lord Ormsby shot a curious glance at his son.

"O, did you extend your tour to Brittany, then?" he observed: after which he refrained from further remarks, becoming silent and thoughtful, as if his mind had been stirred by some troubling reminiscence.

"Does it still contain the bones of the saint?" asked Godfrey, jocularly.

"It contains souvenirs of my continental tour — nothing more," replied Ivar with a dark glance, as if inviting the surgeon to mind his own business.

And then, apparently impatient of further questions, he cut the matter short by motioning the man to take up the chest again, and he himself led the way up the grand staircase to his own bedroom, where, after seeing the precious reliquary locked within a wardrobe, he seemed to be more at ease.

The irritation betrayed by Ivar over this incident puzzled Beatrice, and left a somewhat disagreeable impression upon her mind.

"Master Ivar," she whispered to her brother, "was trying to smuggle that chest into Ravenhall. Why should he desire to conceal the fact that he is bringing

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home a reliquary? Depend upon it, the chest contains something that he does not wish his father to see. What can it be?"

During the course of the dinner that followed, Ivar was the principal speaker, rattling off various incidents of his continental tour.

There was nothing particularly edifying or brilliant in these reminiscences, but Lord Ormsby evidently thought otherwise: for, from time to time he would turn to his guests with an air of pride, as if inviting them to take note of his son's remarks.

"That is one good trait in the earl's character," thought Beatrice. "He has great affection for his son. I doubt very much whether the son deserves it."

When, at a late hour, she and her brother rose to take their departure, so heavy a storm was raging that the earl pressed them to stay for the night, and to this arrangement Godfrey and his sister assented, the former little foreseeing that his stay would have a remarkable bearing on the events of the future.

"Well, Ivar," said the earl, when the two found themselves alone. "What do you think of Beatrice?"

"She has grown devilishly handsome."

"She is a girl whom any man might be proud to marry."

Ivar was resting his head upon his hand, and his face was hidden in shadow: therefore the earl did not perceive the sudden change in his son's expression.

"Marry?" echoed the viscount.

"I want to see you married, Ivar, and to no one but Beatrice."

"The devil!" muttered Ivar uneasily; and then, aloud, he added, "Does Trixie know of this wish of yours?"

"I have occasionally hinted at it."

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"Her manner towards me to-night can scarcely be called encouraging. She was decidedly cold and stand-offish."

"Perseverance on your part will soon overcome her indifference."

"If I must take a wife, why must she be cousin Trixie, seeing that she hasn't a penny to bless herself with?"

"She is richer than you or I," said the earl, with a dry laugh. "Ivar, I am about to tell you a secret, the knowledge of which will soon cause you to waive your objection — if you have any — to this match."

"Richer than I," thought Ivar. "What does the old fool mean?"

The earl seemed ill at ease. He remained silent for several minutes, evidently debating within himself as to the wisdom of disclosing the secret. At last, after glancing all around the apartment, as if to make certain that no one was within hearing, he bent forward in his chair towards Ivar, and began to speak in a low tone. The communication took a long time in the telling, and when it was ended, the viscount sat in silence with a look of consternation on his face.

Recovering from his amazement he muttered hoarsely, "Why have you not told me of this before?"

"You were not of an age to hear it. You are old enough now to understand the virtues of silence and secrecy."

"And this, this son — what did you call him, Idris? — where is he now?"

For reply Lord Ormsby produced from the bookcase a copy of the *Times* newspaper, dated seven years previously.

One of its columns was headed, "Terrible fire at Paris. Burning of the *Hôtel de l'Univers*." The earl's fore-

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finger, moving down a list of victims, stopped at the name, " Idris Marville, aged 23."

Ivar's features relaxed something of their dismay.

" Satisfactory from my point of view," he muttered.

" None but you and I know this secret, but it is perpetually open to discovery as long as that church and its records exist. You now see the necessity for this match with Beatrice. Ravenhall and the coronet are really hers. Marry her then, and you will thus secure your position as lord of Ravenhall. — What is your answer ? "

" Humph ! Suppose it'll have to be."

The sullen look on Ivar's face caused his father to elevate his eyebrows in surprise. It certainly *did* seem strange that the viscount, who had pronounced Beatrice to be " devilishly handsome," should evince dissatisfaction at the prospect of marrying her !

* * * * * *

The sleeping apartment allotted to Godfrey Rothwell contained the most luxurious bed he had ever occupied, and he speedily fell into a sound sleep, from which he was abruptly roused by a noise in the corridor outside his bedroom door.

He sat up and listened. Before stepping into bed he had switched off the electric light, but the darkness now became faintly illumined by a horizontal line of light appearing at the foot of the door. Its origin was obvious : some one was walking in the corridor and bearing a lamp or candle.

The line of light had no sooner appeared than it disappeared, showing that the person had passed by.

Moved by the thought that it might be a burglar, Godfrey stepped quietly from his bed, and cautiously opening the door to the extent of a few inches, peeped out.

There, a few feet distant, with his back towards him,

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was Viscount Walden moving quietly along the corridor. Evidently he had not been to bed, for he was still wearing the dress suit he had worn at dinner: to it he had added a hard felt hat, into the brim of which there was stuck a lighted candle, after the fashion of a Cornish miner.

With both hands he was half-dragging, half-carrying the cypress chest about which he had displayed so much concern. It was the accidental fall of this reliquary that had roused Godfrey from sleep.

Now, when a young man is detected in the dead of night stealing along with a reliquary that he has tried to introduce surreptitiously into his father's house, it may be inferred that he is actuated by a bad motive; such, at least, was Godfrey's inference. Accordingly, though conscious of the meanness of espionage, yet, moved by a feeling for which he could not account, he resolved to follow the viscount, and ascertain, if possible, the meaning of this strange proceeding.

Waiting till Ivar had turned a corner of the corridor, Godfrey, having hurriedly slipped into his clothes, stole forth in his stockinged feet and followed at a distance, lurking within the shadows, and exercising the utmost vigilance to prevent himself from being seen. Fortunately, there were at intervals, various pieces of furniture, as well as curtains and recesses, of all which Godfrey took prompt advantage whenever Ivar seemed on the point of giving a backward glance.

The viscount's course, after he had left the corridor in which the bedrooms were situated, conducted him down a staircase and along a second corridor, this latter terminating at the door of the Picture Gallery. Here he paused, and sat down upon the box to rest himself. He was no athlete, and the moving of this heavy chest was a tax upon his strength.

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The Mystery of the Reliquary

By the grim and dismal circle of light shed around by the taper in Ivar's hat Godfrey could see that the viscount's face was pale and marked by an expression of fear, and that he gave a start at the sudden coughing of the night wind among the trees without.

Some of the fear manifested by him seemed to pass over to Godfrey, who found himself becoming strangely suspicious as to the contents of the chest. The secrecy observed by the viscount was extremely suggestive of the theory of crime. Was the reliquary the receptacle of guilty evidence which Ivar, unable to dispose of elsewhere, was bringing to Ravenhall as the safest place of concealment?

The reliquary itself, apart altogether from the consideration of its contents, had something gruesome about it. Though the exterior carvings were mediæval in character, Godfrey, who was somewhat of a connoisseur on wood, had felt, when surveying the chest at the entrance-hall, that it was far more ancient than the middle ages: with that durability peculiar to cypress wood, the chest might have seen the classic days of Greece: differing little in shape from an Egyptian mummy-case, it might have held the embalmed remains of a Rameses: nay, its antiquity perhaps antedated the very Pyramids themselves!

He had ample leisure for these reflections, for the viscount, having once seated himself, seemed loth to move forward again.

At last, pulling out a spirit flask, Ivar took a deep draught, and, rising to his feet, produced a key with which he unlocked the door of the Picture Gallery.

Then, lifting the reliquary by means of a silver ring affixed to the lid, he proceeded to traverse the entire length of the hall, dragging his burden with him.

Godfrey, who was no stranger to the place, surmised

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that the viscount's journey was almost at an end, since the gallery terminated in a room from which Ivar would have no egress, except by the same door that he was now approaching.

The viscount's first act on entering the room was to close the door. Upon this Godfrey glided swiftly forward, and falling upon one knee, endeavoured to obtain a glimpse of the interior by applying his eye to the key-hole. In this he was thwarted by the key in the lock, and though the key was on his side of the door, he hesitated to remove it, lest the sound should attract Ivar's attention.

Godfrey could detect no light within the chamber, and therefore he assumed that Ivar must have extinguished his taper.

Why?

Godfrey placed his ear to the door. No sound came from within. If the room contained an occupant, that occupant was motionless, or, if moving, was moving silently and in the dark.

Then suddenly it occurred to him that perhaps Ivar had quitted the chamber by a secret exit known only to himself.

Godfrey grew perplexed, impatient. In standing thus inactive he was losing the chance of discovering the viscount's secret. Still, Ivar might be within, and the surgeon deemed it imprudent to push open the door.

A way of solving the difficulty presented itself. He suddenly turned the key in the lock, clicking it loudly, to the end that, if Ivar were really within, he could not fail to learn that he was now a prisoner.

Godfrey listened. There was no cry of surprise: no hasty rush of feet to the door: no movement at all. After waiting a few moments, he came to the conclusion that the room was untenanted.

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He turned the key, and pushed open the door.

Aided by a subdued light, tender and dreamy, that stole through a latticed casement, he had visible proof that the chamber was devoid of anything in human shape. The cypress chest had also vanished.

No way of egress was visible save by the window; but Ivar had not made his exit by this, as the state of its fastenings clearly showed. His disappearance was obviously due to the existence of some secret passage.

Godfrey, loth to turn back now that he had come thus far, resolved to make an examination of the room, even at the risk of being discovered by the returning Ivar.

He began his search with the fireplace.

Surely some propitious fairy was directing his steps! A long slab of stone, that formed one side of the fireplace, had sunk to the level of the hearth, revealing a passage behind. This slab was worked by a pulley, since he could feel at each side the ropes by which it had been lowered; but without stopping to examine the mechanism, he entered the passage and moved forwards through the darkness, exploring the way before him both with hand and foot in order to guard against a possible precipitation down a flight of stairs. The sequel justified this precaution, for he soon found himself at the head of a flight of stone steps. He counted forty of them before he reached the level flooring of another passage. At the end of this a faint light could be seen proceeding from behind a door that stood ajar. He concluded that the viscount had at last attained his destination, and was occupied on the task, whatever it was, that had brought him there.

Godfrey, drawing near, ventured to take a peep through the partly-opened door, and caught a glimpse of a large stone chamber, octagonal in shape. From its vaulted roof hung a lighted sconce. No window was visible,

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and, connecting this circumstance with the number of stairs he had descended, Godfrey was of opinion that it was a subterranean chamber. The floor was devoid of carpet, and the only pieces of furniture were a table of carved oak and four antique chairs of the same material.

Of the eight sides of the chamber one was occupied by the doorway where Godfrey stood: the other seven were severally pierced by recesses, the depth of which he was unable to ascertain, since the entrance of each was hung with a curtain of black velvet of such length that the silver lace fringing its foot touched the floor. The curtains draping two of the alcoves were plain: the remaining five were adorned with lettering worked in silver thread. As he read the lettering by the light of the flame that burned in the antique sconce Godfrey, familiar though he was with death, dissection, and all that the non-medical mind regards as gruesome, could not repress some uneasy sensations. That silver lettering recorded the names and titles of the deceased Earls of Ormsby, from Lancelot Ravengar, the first peer, to Urien Ravengar, the tenth.

Godfrey knew himself to be on forbidden ground. He was standing on the threshold of the secret burial vault of the lords of Ravenhall!

Ivar was in one of the alcoves, whither he had betaken himself with the cypress chest, but as the curtain concealed him from view, it was impossible for Godfrey to see what the viscount was doing. What Godfrey heard, however, was sufficiently alarming. From the recess came a recurrence of sounds that could be attributed only to the use of a screw-driver. There could be no doubt that Ivar was engaged in the work of removing one of the coffin lids, and Godfrey felt, moreover, that this act had some connection with the contents of the reliquary.

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Was Ivar about to transfer the evidences of his guilt—for of his guilt Godfrey now entertained no doubt—from the reliquary to one of the coffins? There could scarcely be a safer place of concealment than a coffin contained in a secret vault, the entrance of which was known to four persons only. Yet this theory seemed precluded by the fact that a coffin constructed to hold one body would not suffice for two. Ivar could scarcely intend to carry off from the crypt the relics of one of his ancestors, since he would have the same difficulty in disposing of a dead earl as of less distinguished remains.

Suddenly there came from Ivar a cry, or rather a yell; he dropped the screw-driver, or whatever tool he was using, and thrusting aside the black velvet curtain, staggered into the vault and tumbled into a chair, where he sat for some moments, his eyes fixed in terror upon the alcove from which he had emerged.

"Bah!" he presently muttered. "What a fool I am! Yet I could swear I heard a whisper coming from the coffin. By God! what creepy work this is!"

A long pull at the spirit flask seemed to infuse new courage into him. He arose and moved again towards the alcove, though with somewhat slow steps.

As Ivar lifted the curtain Godfrey tried to ascertain what lay behind, but succeeded only in catching a glimpse of the reliquary, which stood on the floor with the taper-lit hat resting upon it.

The viscount picked up the fallen tool and resumed the task of screw-loosing. Then, after what seemed an age to the waiting surgeon, the screw-driver was dropped, and Godfrey became aware that Ivar had removed the coffin-lid, for he had placed it on the floor in such a manner that one end of it projected beneath the curtain and appeared in the vault.

Godfrey was unable to tell what followed. Ivar's work,

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whatever its character, was performed in silence, and lasted a considerable time.

More than once Godfrey stole into the vault for the purpose of peering behind the curtain, but on each occasion he did not get beyond the table, the fear of detection restraining him from proceeding farther.

Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he took out his penknife, and turning to the alcove nearest the door, he quickly and silently cut off a corner from the velvet drapery.

"This may be of service," he thought, thrusting the fragment inside his pocket, "if at any time it should become necessary to prove that I have stood in the secret funeral vault of the Ravengars."

Ivar's task was evidently coming to an end, for the coffin-lid was now drawn from beneath the curtain into the alcove, and the peculiar sounds caused by the application of the screw-driver recommenced.

With their cessation Ivar reappeared from behind the curtain, wearing his taper-lit hat again, and dragging the chest, which, judged by the effort required for its removal, was in no way diminished from its former weight — a circumstance which puzzled Godfrey not a little.

He was preparing for flight, but as Ivar had seated himself in the chair again, he was tempted to linger a moment.

"Thank the devil that's over," said the viscount in a tone of satisfaction, "and I hope Lorelie will be satisfied."

"*Lorelie!*" murmured Godfrey with a start. "Lorelie! Surely he does not mean Mademoiselle Rivière?"

He had no time just then to consider this question, for Ivar, having drained the few drops that remained in the flask, was now extinguishing the flame in the sconce, preparatory to leaving the crypt.

Godfrey immediately stole off, and succeeded in reach-

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ing his room without detection. He went to bed again and slept soundly.

He awoke to find the sun glinting pleasantly through the diamond panes. The brightness of the morning had so cheering an effect on his spirits that he felt disposed at first to regard the event of the preceding night as the result of a dream.

Then, his memory quickening, he thrust his hand beneath his pillow and drew forth a piece of black velvet edged with silver lace.

"It was no dream," he muttered, gazing at the relic. "I have really stood in the secret burial vault of the Ravengars. What a story this will be for Beatrice!"

Godfrey was accustomed to make his sister his confidante in all things; but, somehow, upon reflection, he resolved, for the present at least, to maintain secrecy respecting Ivar's strange doings.

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CHAPTER III

IDRIS REDIVIVUS

"IVAR has been at home two months, yet we have had no visit from him."

The speaker was Godfrey Rothwell, and the scene the breakfast-room of his villa, Wave Crest.

"Why should he visit us?" asked Beatrice.

"Ahem! as a suitor for your hand, in compliance with his father's wish."

"Ivar had better not insult me by such an offer."

"An offer of marriage can scarcely be called an insult, Trixie."

"It would be — from *him*," returned Beatrice with a heightened colour. "I speak what I know," she added oracularly.

She began to pour out the coffee: while Godfrey, somewhat puzzled by her words, turned to the letters awaiting him. No sooner had he glanced at the hand-writing on the envelope of the first than he gave a great start.

"Heavens! have the dead returned to life?"

He hastily broke the seal and ran his eye over the letter, while the mystified Beatrice awaited the explanation of his words.

"From my old college-friend, Idris Marville."

"What?" cried Beatrice with a little scream of surprise. "Is he not dead, then? Did he escape the fire?"

"That's self-evident. There has been a dreadful mistake somewhere. He will prove that he is alive by pay-

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ing us a visit. In fact, he will be here this very morning. Well, this *is* a surprise!"

"More — a pleasure," added his sister.

Beatrice had never seen Idris, but she had often heard of him from Godfrey, and knew the painful story of his boyhood. She was aware, too, that on one occasion, Godfrey, being in pecuniary difficulties, had applied to Idris in preference to the Earl of Ormsby, and had received by return of post a handsome cheque. The memory of this event was still fresh in her mind, and she was desirous of showing her gratitude to her brother's benefactor.

"He signs himself 'Breakspear,' I see," she said, glancing at the signature of Idris.

"Yes: he has dropped the name of Marville, and has taken his mother's maiden name. It is easy to guess his reason."

True to the promise contained in his letter Idris arrived that same morning, and Beatrice took a good view of him from behind the curtain of her bedroom window, as he strode up the garden path accompanied by Godfrey.

Twenty-three years had passed since that memorable night at Quilaix, and Idris was now verging upon thirty — dark-eyed, handsome, athletic, with a face bronzed by southern suns. His appearance impressed Beatrice favourably.

"There is nothing mean or ignoble about *him*," she murmured.

The first greetings being ended, Idris sat down to a pleasant luncheon, presided over by Beatrice.

"Your name has been so often on Godfrey's lips," she said, "that you seem quite like an old friend, though I never thought to see you after the announcement of your death in the newspapers."

Idris smiled.

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"Perhaps I have done wrong in letting people think that I perished in the burning of the '*Hotel de l' Univers*.' At the time of the fire I was at the opera-house. On leaving I found the boulevards ringing with the news. I bought a newspaper and discovered my own name erroneously inserted among the list of victims. I resolved not to set the mistake right, for it suddenly occurred to me that here was a convenient opportunity to die — to the world. Wherever I went, the name Marville recalled my father's crime, or rather, supposed crime. 'Let the world think that Eric Marville's son is dead,' I thought, 'and let him begin life anew, and under a different name.'"

"Was the yacht *Nemesis*, in which your father escaped, never heard of again?" asked Godfrey.

"It vanished, leaving not a trace behind."

"Strange! The news of your father's escape, together with a description of the delinquent vessel, would be telegraphed to all civilized countries. Every ocean-steamer, every seaport, would be on the watch for the yacht, and yet you say it was never seen again."

"Its disappearance shows how well Captain Rochefort had devised his plans," Idris answered.

"Since your father did not communicate with you, his only son, it follows, almost as a matter of course, that he did not communicate with his more distant relatives?"

"His relatives, if he had any, are unknown to me: in fact, I am quite in the dark as to my father's antecedents. Among all his papers there was not one letter relating to his kinsfolk, nor any clue whatever to indicate his history prior to his settling at Nantes in 1866."

"You are certain that your father was English born? Because if so, his name, and date and place of birth, together with his parents' names, should be among the records of Somerset House."

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"I have tried Somerset House, and have traced several Eric Marvilles, some living and some dead, but none of them could I identify as my father. I am sometimes disposed to believe that Marville was not his real name, but one assumed by him on settling at Nantes."

"Cannot your mother's relatives give you any information?"

"They, too, are ignorant of my father's origin. My mother was an English governess at Nantes when she first met my father. A few months after her marriage the death of an aunt endowed her with an ample fortune, a fortune which has devolved upon me."

"If twenty-three years have passed since your father was last heard of," said Beatrice, "do you not think that the probabilities point to his death? He must be dead," she added. "He would not be so unfatherly as not to communicate with you during all these years."

"That is my opinion — at times: and at other times I think he is still living, but resolved, from some mistaken notion of honour, to ignore me until he can give me the heritage of a fair name."

"If he is alive," continued Beatrice, "he has perhaps married again, and has children, and, though it sounds harsh to say it, other and new interests which your appearance on the scene might embarrass."

This was a bitter thought, but by no means new to Idris.

"I trust I am not offending you by the question," observed Godfrey, "but do you really, in your heart of hearts, believe that your father was innocent?"

"There, the torture. My mother was firmly convinced of his innocence, and only an hour or two before her death, as if gifted with prevision, she did her best to impress me with her belief; nay, more, she made me take an oath that I would, on attaining manhood, use all my

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endeavours to clear my father's name. Yet the thought often strikes me that I am nursing an illusion in thinking him innocent. Who am I that I should set up my opinion against that of the judge, the jury, and the press?"

"And the masked man who stole the runic ring — what of him?" Godfrey asked.

"He, too, is a person who has eluded all my inquiries. And small wonder! Had I been a man at the time when these events happened, instead of a boy of seven, my investigations, begun at once, might have met with success, whereas the long lapse of years has handicapped my efforts. And yet, fanciful as it may sound to you, Godfrey, I am not without hope, even at this late day, of finding my father, and of vindicating his innocence. At any rate, this is the object to which my life is devoted, and from which I shall never swerve."

And Idris, having satisfied the curiosity of his friends on various other points, immaterial in themselves, dropped the subject, and the conversation flowed into other channels.

Presently they were interrupted by the appearance of the page-boy, with a note addressed to Godfrey, who, finding that he was wanted in a critical case, withdrew, leaving Beatrice to entertain the guest.

"I am afraid, Mr. Breakspear," she said, "that you will spend a rather dull time here; our household is a quiet one, and Ormsby offers little in the shape of entertainment. Our only show-places are the old Saxon church on the hill-top, and Ravenhall — Lord Ormsby's seat."

"I think I'll take a stroll towards the old Saxon church," said Idris, who was simple in his tastes, and easily pleased.

"I have to pass that way," Beatrice said, "and, if you care to accompany me ——"

Idris, who found Beatrice's soft grey eyes very attrac-

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tive, readily accepted her offer; and, after a pleasant walk of half an hour, the two reached the ancient church of the Northumbrian saint, Oswald.

"This," said Beatrice, as they passed through an arched doorway, and stood within the subdued light cast by the stained glass, "this is the Ravengar Chantry."

"A sort of oratory and burial-place of the Ravengars?"

"Yes. These monumental brasses are the tombs of my ancestors, that is, of those who antedated the Restoration; those who lived after that time are interred in the private crypt at Ravenhall. For you must know—— Ah, listen!" she said, breaking off abruptly. "Some one is playing the organ."

"And playing with a masterly touch, too," remarked Idris, after a brief interval of listening.

"Who can it be?" murmured Beatrice. "Our own organist is not capable of such music."

She was about to advance on tiptoe from the transept to the nave in order to obtain a view of the organ-loft, but Idris gently checked her.

"Stay a moment. If we show ourselves we may disconcert the musician and put an end to his playing."

He sat down on a stone seat in the transept. Beatrice followed his example: and for several minutes they listened in silence, entranced by the sweet and noble strains flowing from the organ-loft.

Then, gradually, a peculiar change came over the spirit of the music.

"Ah! what an eerie strain!" murmured Beatrice, a shiver passing over her.

Idris, too, found himself curiously affected. Becoming oblivious of external things, yielding himself entirely to the influence of the music, he essayed to enter into the spirit and meaning of the piece. Those solemn rhythmic

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cadences that thrilled him with a melancholy awe could be interpreted only as a Funeral March. At intervals there pealed from the organ shivering, staccato notes, like the heart-sobs of those who "keen" for the dead, succeeded by a mournful, stately measure, as if the cold voice of Fate were declaring that death must be endured as the common lot of all. The very soul of grief was voiced in those notes, which, lofty and sad, mysterious as the moonlight, seemed to weep as they kissed the cold stones of the chantry.

During the dream-like spell induced by the weird character of the requiem Idris suddenly became subject to a very strange feeling, the like of which he had never before known. Vivid as fire on a dark night there came upon him the startling conviction that this was not his first visit to the Church of St. Oswald. He had been in this chantry in time past; he had seen these monumental brasses before: that Funeral March was a familiar air. The interior of the edifice was as the face of an old friend who has not been seen for years.

He was sitting in a part of the transept from which it was impossible for him to view the opposite ends of the nave, unless he possessed the power of being able to see around a distant corner; yet, directing his mental eye towards the interior of the church, he could see the chancel-window at its eastern end, and the hexagonal font by the western porch.

He felt that he could find his way about the building without once stumbling, even though it were wrapped in the gloom of night. Every part of it, from the belfry tower above to the crypt below, was familiar ground.

With a solemn and long drawn-out diminuendo the music ceased.

Shivering like one roused from a sleep upon the cold

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ground Idris started from his reverie, to find Beatrice regarding him with a curious, half-frightened look.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Breakspear. I have spoken to you three times, and you have given me no answer. Have you seen a ghost? You look quite 'fey,' as we say in these parts."

"I have been subjected to a very singular experience," Idris answered, looking around with a perplexed air. "Till to-day I have never set foot in Ormsby. Yet I know this church, know it as well as I know my chambers in the Albany. Now, tell me, does not the chancel-window contain three divisions?"

Beatrice murmured an affirmative, seeing nothing wonderful in Idris' remark, inasmuch as chancel-windows usually contain three divisions.

"And in the central pane is painted the Madonna, treading upon the Old Dragon, with the Holy Child in her arms?"

Beatrice, beginning to be surprised, said that this was correct.

"The right-hand pane represents King Oswald setting up the Cross as his standard for battle, while the left portrays him at his palace-gate, distributing his gold and silver plate among the poor."

"Yes. How do you know, if you have never been here before?" Beatrice burst forth, her amazement increasing as Idris proceeded to enumerate other details.

"Mr. Breakspear, you *must* have been here before!"

"Never! I solemnly assure you; at least, not in the body."

He walked towards the head of an oblong marble sepulchre, surmounted by the gilt effigy of a crusading Ravengar, lying in cross-legged repose.

"Mark me," he said, turning to Beatrice, "I shall find

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on the other side of this tomb a circular hole large enough to admit my hand."

At the foot of the stone knight was sculptured the heraldic shield of the Ravengars, much defaced, and crumbling with age; in the first quartering of which was a round orifice of sufficient dimensions to admit the insertion of Idris' hand.

"What do you say to this?" he asked of Beatrice, who had followed him to the tomb.

But Beatrice, full of wonderment, could say nothing.

"I have a distinct remembrance of placing my hand here in days gone by," Idris continued. "Yes: I have been in this church before: I am as certain of that as I am of my own existence. But how? There's the puzzle. Not in the body, for my life has been passed at a distance from Ormsby. How then? Has the knowledge been imparted to me in a dream? Or is it a fact that during sleep the spirit of man may visit distant places? Or was old Pythagoras right in asserting that we have all had a previous existence? Am I a reincarnation of one who was familiar with this place in time past? Miss Ravengar, how is one to explain this psychological puzzle?"

Beatrice's reply was checked by a light footfall. A young lady, attired in a soft clinging dress of muslin, was coming slowly towards the chantry.

Idris looked up and met her eyes, eyes of a dark, tender violet. One glance: and then — and then ——

If he had been previously required to write an essay on love, that essay would have run on the lines that love, to be sincere and lasting, must be grounded on the esteem that a man and a woman have for each other's good qualities; that love therefore must be the product of time; and that, consequently, genuine love at first sight is an impossibility.

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He thought differently now, as he gazed upon a face fairer than any he had ever seen: so pure the spirit breathing from it that, like the face of a Madonna upon a cathedral window, it seemed hallowed by a light coming from beyond.

If, in the language of the mystic, all beauty be a manifestation of the Divinity, is it any marvel that Idris, as he stood mute and motionless, should have felt an awe, a sense of adoration, stealing over him?

As the young lady drew near she acknowledged Beatrice's presence with an inclination of her head, an action to which Beatrice responded with a frigid air, an air that seemed to trouble the other, for her eyes drooped, and a faint colour mantled her face. With quiet dignity she passed by, and the next moment had vanished through the porch.

Not till then did Idris find his tongue.

"What a divine face!" he murmured. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Rivière — Lorelie Rivière," answered Beatrice somewhat coldly.

"Rivière. She is French, then?"

Though evidently disinclined to pursue the subject, Beatrice, seeing Idris' interest in the stranger, proceeded to enlighten him so far as she was able.

"Mademoiselle Rivière is a lady, apparently of independent means. She came to Ormsby about four months ago, taking for her residence The Cedars, a villa on the North Road. She lives a quiet and secluded life. Her name indicates French nationality, but beyond that fact no one knows anything of her origin and antecedents. Godfrey once attended her professionally, and she impressed him as being a lady of birth and refinement: but," added Beatrice, compressing her lips, "*I* do not like her."

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The tone in which she delivered herself of this last sentiment somewhat vexed Idris: but whatever might be the cause of her dislike, he felt that it did not originate from jealousy of the stranger's beauty. Beatrice was too high-minded to be actuated by so paltry a motive. For his own part he could not associate anything bad with the sad grave eyes of Lorelie Rivière. Beatrice, in her judgment of the other's character, must surely be the victim of some misapprehension.

"But — but — was she the musician?" he asked.

"It seems so," replied Beatrice, moving into the nave. "There is no one in the organ-loft now. But here comes the boy who blows. He will tell us. Roger, was it Mademoiselle Rivière who was playing just now?"

The lad gave an affirmative nod, and exhibited with pleasure the coin he had received as a fee.

"Comes here often," he said. "Calls at our cottage when she wants me to blow."

Idris was silent, marvelling that one so young should play with a touch so masterly: marvelling still more that her music should have wrought upon him an impression so weird.

He moved around the church with Beatrice, and then mounted the stairs leading to the gallery, feigning to be interested in what he saw, in reality seeing nothing but the beautiful face of Lorelie Rivière.

On the seat fronting the organ was a book, left behind probably by an oversight. Idris lifted the volume, a handsome one, bound in vellum and gold, and was much surprised at the title.

"*Paulus Diaconus de Gestis Langobardorum*," he read aloud.

"What a dreadful title!" murmured Beatrice. "What does it mean?"

"It is Paul Warnefrid's *History of the Lombards*, a

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book you'll scarcely meet with once in a lifetime. Quite a thrilling work, no doubt, to antiquaries of the Dryas-dust order, but I cannot imagine a lady taking to this style of literature. To begin with, it's all in Latin: evidently she understands that language."

"Perhaps the book does not belong to Mademoiselle Rivière."

"The margin of almost every page contains notes in a lady's handwriting — obviously the remarks of one who understands the work. She seems to have been a diligent student," continued Idris, observing the numerous annotations. "Ah! what is this? 'The Fatal Skull,' written across the title-page. On other pages are the initials 'F. S.,' presumably standing for the same words, 'Fatal Skull.' See here, 'F. S.,' and here again, 'F. S.'"

"*The Fatal Skull!*" said Beatrice in wonderment. "What is meant by that?"

At Beatrice's request Idris translated some of the passages marked with the letters "F. S.," but he failed to grasp their significance, there being no connection whatever between a skull and the subject-matter of the paragraph. Then, becoming conscious that it was an unchivalrous proceeding to pry into an absent lady's book, he was on the point of closing it, when his eye was caught by the following words written upon the fly-leaf: —

Lorelie Rivière,
16, Place Graslin,
Nantes.

"16, Place Graslin?" murmured Idris in great surprise. "Heavens! It was before the door of 16, Place Graslin that M. Duchesne was murdered twenty-seven years ago!"

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CHAPTER IV

THE SECRET OF THE RUNIC RING

THE room that Godfrey Rothwell was accustomed to call his study was a small and cosy apartment, well furnished with books; while, here and there, were many ornaments betraying the taste of Beatrice, for the room was jointly occupied by brother and sister. They loved to be together, and while Godfrey studied his medical tomes, Beatrice's fingers would be busy with sewing or embroidery.

On this particular evening the presence of Idris caused both study and needlework to be suspended. He had whetted the curiosity of his entertainers by affirming that his coming to Ormsby had something to do with the search for his father: he was, in fact, following a clue.

His hearers pressed for enlightenment.

"Let us sit around the fire, and I will explain my meaning."

Drawing a comfortable arm-chair to the hearth Beatrice composed herself for what she felt was about to be an interesting disclosure.

"Among the papers," Idris began, "handed to me on my eighteenth birthday by my mother's executors was a piece of vellum with runic letters upon it. Though eleven years had passed I immediately recognized these characters as being identical with those engraved on the Ring of Odin. My mother had had the forethought to make a copy of the inscription."

Here Idris paused, reading a question in Beatrice's eyes.

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"Have you the transcript with you?" she asked. "It will be interesting to look at, though we do not understand it."

Idris produced from his pocketbook a scrap of vellum inscribed with four lines of tiny runic letters.

"And these are runes?" said Beatrice, looking at them attentively. "They are very like the characters on the bugle that hangs within the porch of Ravenhall."

"Precisely," said Godfrey, "inasmuch as that is an old Norse drinking-horn. But we are interrupting Idris' story."

"The sight of this inscription naturally interested me," continued Idris, "and I resolved to make an attempt at its decipherment, in the hope that it might cast a ray of light upon the mystery of Duchesne's murder, for I have always held to the belief that he was assassinated for the sake of the altar-ring. With this view I procured the services of a professor eminent for his knowledge of Norse antiquities, and under his tuition I began the study of runology.

"I was soon able to read all the letters of the inscription, and to pronounce what I supposed were syllables and words: but syllables and words would not yield any sense. And here and there came a juxtaposition of consonants quite unpronounceable. To add to the difficulty there were no spaces to show where one word ended and another began. All the characters were equally close together and seemed to form one long word. I did my best to break the inscription up into its component parts, but failed. I could not distinguish one familiar term. Either the language was not old Norse, or the professor had taught me wrongly."

"Why did you not lay the inscription before the professor," asked Beatrice, "and get him to decipher it for you?"

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"Because I did not wish any one to know the secret till I myself had first ascertained its value. In the belief that it might be written in some language other than old Norse I made incursions, not very deep, I fear, into Danish, Frisian, Icelandic, and other northern dialects, but failed to identify the inscription with any one of these tongues.

"At last in despair I cast aside the caution I had hitherto exercised, and placed the writing before my tutor; but, eminent runologist as he was, he could extract no meaning from it.

"Anxious to begin the search for my father, I parted from the Norse professor; but yet, amid all my wanderings through Europe, I never quite gave up the hope of being able to decipher the inscription.

"Now, a few weeks ago, it occurred to me that the art of secret writing may have been practised in Norse times just as in our own. Hitherto, following modern usage, I had always read the inscription from left to right: why not from right to left, as ancient Hebrew is read? I tried the course, but it made me no wiser.

"However, the cryptographic idea grew upon me, and was not to be shaken off. As you perceive, it is a four-line inscription; I therefore read downwards, combining the letters in the first line with those directly beneath in the second, third, and fourth lines, but with no success. I read upwards: disappointment was still my lot. I tried the plan of omitting every alternate letter. I seemed as far off as ever."

"But you succeeded in the end," said Beatrice.

"Yes. By playing at random with the letters, I hit upon the key to the decipherment. Observe this character," continued Idris, pointing to one in the first line, shaped thus:—ᚼ. "It is called *Hagl*, and corresponds to our H. As it is slightly larger than the other letters,

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I had come to regard it as the initial one in the series, and the sequel proved that I was correct. Beginning with this *Hagl*, I omitted the three following letters, taking the fifth which corresponds to our i."

"That gives us H-i," said Beatrice.

"Just so. Passing over the next three characters we come to the equivalent of our l."

"H-i-l," said Beatrice.

"Proceeding in this way I add two more letters, and the result is a woman's name, as common in Norse days as in our own."

"You mean Hilda?"

"Precisely. Hilda is the first word of the inscription. Light had dawned at last. I had discovered the key to the writing, and it is this: every fourth letter is to be treated as if in immediate sequence.

"I instantly marked off the characters into sets of four. By taking out the first letter in each quartette, and placing them in consecutive order, I found the result was an intelligible sentence. By treating the second letter of each quartette in like manner the sentence was continued: and so with the third and fourth letters. There could be no doubt about it. I had mastered the secret of Odin's Ring."

"And what *is* the secret?" said Beatrice breathlessly.

Idris could not avoid smiling at her eagerness. It was pleasant to have so fair and interested a listener.

"Impulsive Beatrice!" said Godfrey. "Idris may wish to keep the secret to himself."

"It will be very unfair, then, after having excited our curiosity," she retorted.

"You shall have the secret," said Idris; "though you will probably be as much disappointed with it as I was. There is nothing very startling in it. It does not relate to Odin and the gods of Valhalla, but to an old Viking

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and a buried treasure. This is my rendering of the Norse runes engraved on the broad perimeter of the ancient altar-ring."

And here Idris drew forth a second piece of vellum, and read from it as follows:—

"'Hilda, the Alruna, to her son, Magnus of Deira, greeting.— Within the lofty tomb of thy sire Orm, the Golden, wilt thou find the treasure won by his high arm. The noontide shadow of the oft-carried throne will be to thee for a sign. And may the fires of the Asas guard thy heritage for thee.— Farewell.'"

"That," continued Idris, after a pause, "is the secret of Odin's Ring: and though, as I have said, I was disappointed at first, yet in course of time I began to think that the knowledge I had acquired might furnish me with a clue—a very faint one, it is true,—towards discovering my father."

"I fail to see how," observed Godfrey.

"In this way. Captain Rochefort, who was instrumental in effecting my father's escape, possessed—so I have learned a copy of this runic inscription. Now, let us suppose that he and my father turned their attention to its decipherment, and, like myself, succeeded. Let us further grant that they had reasons for believing that the old Viking's treasure still existed in the spot where it was originally placed. Allowing these premises, what is the conclusion?"

"That they would endeavour to possess themselves of this treasure."

"Just so. They would try to find the Viking's tomb. Therefore, if I, too, could hit upon the place——"

"I understand. You might come upon some trace of your father."

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"That is my meaning. I admit that it is a very slender thread upon which to hang my hopes, but it is all that is left me. To find the burial-place of Orm the Golden became my next object, a somewhat difficult feat, seeing that he is a person who has altogether escaped the historian's pen. However, I have succeeded."

"What!" exclaimed Godfrey, incredulously. "You have discovered the burial-place of this unknown Viking, who, granting the reality of his existence, must have lived at least a thousand years ago?" And on receiving a nod of affirmation, he asked, "How did you accomplish it? '*Within the lofty tomb of thy sire Orm, the Golden,*'" continued he, reading from Idris' translation of the inscription, "'*wilt thou find the treasure, won by his high arm.*' There is nothing here to indicate the site of this 'lofty tomb.'"

"There is just a hint. Magnus, the Viking's son, is said to be 'of Deira.' I infer, therefore, that the father Orm was likewise of Deira; that in Deira he lived, in Deira he died, and in Deira he was buried. 'Look for the tomb in Deira,' became my watchword."

"Deira," said Beatrice quickly. "Is not Deira the ancient name for this part of the country?"

"Yes," Godfrey answered, "and it is rather a wide area for our friend Idris to explore, seeing that the name included all the country from the Tyne to the Humber, and from the Pennines to the sea."

"True," assented Idris; "but we may narrow the area of our search considerably. These old Vikings had such love for the sea that they were usually buried within sound of the breakers. We shall not err, therefore, if we confine our attention to the sea-board only of Deira."

"Even then you will have a coast-line of more than one hundred miles to explore."

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"A glance at an ordnance map will help us to fix the site."

"In what way?"

"Thus. I take it that Orm the Viking, being master of much wealth, as is clear from the words on the ring, would build for himself a dwelling or castle by the sea. Around the abode of their chief the vassals and dependants would fix theirs, thus forming the nucleus of a town. Now what name would such a place be likely to take?"

"My dear Idris," said Godfrey, protestingly, "how can I tell? — or you either?" he added.

"Well, like most town-names of Norse origin it would probably end in the syllable *by*."

"I will grant you that much — no more."

"You cannot see at what I am aiming?"

"I am completely in the dark."

"Receive a ray of light, then. Don't you think that if this Orm built a town, that town would bear his name?"

"Surely you are not alluding to Ormsby?"

"But I am. This town must have received its name from some one called Orm, and it is my belief that this Orm was none other than the Viking who figures on the runic ring. In the neighbourhood of this town, then, we must look for the 'lofty tomb' of my Norse warrior. Now, four miles to the north of us, there is, so local guide-books say, a lonely valley called Ravensdale, containing ——"

"Containing," Beatrice broke in, excitedly, "containing a rounded, artificial hillock, over fifty feet high, and known by the name of Ormfell."

"Ah! I see you know it," smiled Idris. "Yes, Ormfell, or Orm's Hill, is the spot where I shall find the bones of the ancient Viking."

"And do you really intend," asked Beatrice, "to bore

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your way to the heart of that hillock in order to see what it contains?"

"Such is the purpose that has brought me to Ormsby, my object being to discover whether this tumulus exhibits traces of having been recently opened. It may be that in the sepulchral chamber within the hillock I shall light upon something that will afford a clue towards discovering my father. It may be a handkerchief merely, a discarded lantern, a tool, a match-box, a button, or some other article trifling in itself, but which a skilled detective will know how to employ in tracing the man he wants. I may come even upon a pocketbook or a letter unwittingly dropped — who can tell? Ormfell is my last hope. Fanciful as it may appear to you, Godfrey, something seems to whisper to me that the interior of that tumulus will furnish me with the means of lifting the veil that has so long shrouded my father's fate."

There was in Idris' manner a confidence which his hearers did not like to quell by the expression of cold doubt, though they considered his expectation fanciful in the extreme.

"Do you intend to obtain the earl's sanction to make your excavations?" asked Beatrice. "Ormfell stands on the Ravengar lands, you know."

"Humph! if I should ask for permission I may meet with a refusal. In such circumstances, therefore, I feel myself justified in committing a bold trespass."

"Well, if you should be caught, Mr. Breakspear," said Beatrice with a blush, "I will intercede for you with Lord Ormsby, for I believe I am rather a favourite of his."

Idris tendered her his thanks. He had almost forgotten that the pretty maiden sitting beside him might one day be the inheritrix of Ravenhall, and owner of those very lands the proprietary rights of which he was preparing to set at naught.

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"But," continued Beatrice, "if you are not going to apply for the earl's permission, how do you intend to escape observation?"

"By conducting my operations in the dead of night."

"Break into a Viking's tomb in the dead of night! What a weird idea!"

"I shall not be the first who has so acted, Miss Ravengar."

"You will not object to my help, I presume?" Godfrey remarked.

"On the contrary, I shall be glad of it."

"I am half-disposed to join in this romantic business myself," said Beatrice with a smile. "How interesting if you should discover the treasure!"

"We are not very likely to discover treasure that was secreted a thousand years ago," commented Godfrey.

"And yet," said Idris, "many sepulchral barrows, opened in our day, are found to contain treasure — coins, drinking-horns, armour, and the like."

"True: but in this case you forget that the words on the runic ring were an express invitation to Orm's son — what was his name, Magnus? — to possess himself of the treasure. He would not leave much for posterity to glean."

"Yes, if he received his mother's ring; but how if it miscarried? Hilda evidently lived far away from her son Magnus, else why should she have engraved her communication on metal, when she could more easily have delivered it *vivâ voce* and face to face? The messenger entrusted with the ring may have gone astray. Travelling was a difficult matter in Norse times, and many perils beset the wayfarer, especially a wayfarer who carried anything worth stealing. Or consider this point, that though Magnus was capable of understanding the runic riddle — otherwise his mother would not have adopted such a

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mode of communication — yet it does not follow that his son or successor was equally skilled. Supposing, then, that Magnus was dead when the messenger arrived with the ring, there may have been no one in Deira capable of interpreting the message. The ring might thus retain its secret, and the hillock its treasure, down to our own time."

"Possible, but not probable," smiled Godfrey.

Beatrice's eyes rested upon the vellum containing Idris' translation of the runic inscription.

"'*The fires of the Asas guard thy heritage for thee!*'" she read. "What does that mean?"

"The Asas were the old Norse gods, who were supposed to dart forth flames upon any one venturing to disturb the sleep of the dead."

"Then beware, Mr. Breakspear," she said playfully, "for you are going the very way to evoke their wrath. '*The noontide shadow of the oft-carried throne will be to thee for a sign.*' How do you interpret that?"

"I wish I could answer you, Miss Ravengar. That sentence is an enigma I've never been able to solve. It is my intention to pay a visit to Ormfell at noon to-morrow, when an inspection of the hillock may perhaps throw some light on the matter."

Soon afterwards Beatrice retired for the night, but it was a long time before sleep came to her. She lay awake, thinking of Idris, and of the passionate look that came into his eyes at the sight of the beautiful Lorelie Rivière.

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CHAPTER V

"THE SHADOW OF THE OFT-CARRIED THRONE"

FOUR miles to the north of Ormsby lies the valley of Ravensdale, extending due east and west, with sides steep and wall-like.

The eastern end opens out upon the sea-beach, and here the width of the valley is greatest, the distance across being about half a mile. Farther inland the breadth contracts, and the sides approach each other till they meet in a narrow leafy gorge, whence issues the slender, silvery Ravensbec.

The valley contains no human habitation. The only sounds that disturb the stillness are the melancholy murmur of the sea, and the occasional tinkling of sheep-bells.

In the middle of the dale, and distant a few hundred yards from the beach, rises the eminence that for centuries has borne the name of Ormfell, an eminence circular at the base, about fifty feet in height, and covered with green turf.

Upon this hillock Idris was now gazing with deep interest.

It was a beautiful summer morning, and with Beatrice for his companion he had come to take a view of the tumulus, preliminary to the task of breaking into it at night.

"We want no geologist," he remarked, "to tell us that this is an artificial elevation. Nature never carved out this pyramid; it has been raised by the hand of man. This is the 'lofty tomb' spoken of on the runic ring.

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Within the heart of this tumulus we shall find all that remains of old Orm the Viking."

Beatrice shared fully in his enthusiasm. She had seen the mound many a time, but now the words on the runic ring had invested the spot with a new and mysterious charm.

"Orm's warriors were men with a taste for the picturesque," she said. "They could not have chosen a prettier place for the grave of their hero."

"Ay, close to the sea, that he doubtless loved well, as became a Norse Viking. And here for ages he has remained in solitary glory, with the surge forever murmuring his requiem."

"This is certainly a tremendous mass of earth to pile over one poor mortal," said Beatrice, contemplating the mound.

"Every vassal was supposed to contribute one helmetful of soil to the grave of his chieftain."

"Judged by that test Orm must have had a pretty numerous following," said Beatrice.

"Or else each follower contributed more than the orthodox helmetful. O, they could toil as well as fight, these old Norsemen. They were not afraid of work."

"May the old Norse blood in us never die out, then!"

"Amen to that! But I see an upright stone crowning the apex of our fell. Let us examine it. There may be runes upon it."

Idris extended his hand to Beatrice and assisted her up the side of the mound. Arrived at the summit he closely inspected the stone, which was a six-sided pillar, about four feet in height, black in colour, relieved here and there by curious red convolutions.

"So far as I can see," he said, "this pillar does not betray any mark of a tool. Its hexagonal shape, then, is due to nature. The stone is basalt, which often assumes

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a six-sided form. These red spirals are apparently sandstone. It is evident that the mass of basalt, of which this pillar is a fragment, was forced upwards in an igneous liquid state through a bed of sandstone, taking up some of the latter in its passage. Hence these red convoluted bands."

"I have heard that there is only one place in Europe where basalt of this character is to be found," said Beatrice, "and that is in a certain valley of the Crimea."

"It may be so. The old Norse people are said by some historians to have been of Scythian origin, and to have migrated from the region of the Crimea. Perhaps they carried this piece of basalt with them. It may have been a *baitulion*, or holy stone; in fact," continued Idris, as he removed some moss from the foot of the pillar, "there can be no doubt about it. Look on this side, and you will see why a sacred character was attributed to it. Tell me, Miss Ravengar, what does this red streak resemble?"

"A curved sword!" cried Beatrice, in wonderment. "Why have I never noticed it before? A curved sword, with blade, hilt, and cross-guard, as perfect as if drawn by human hand."

"Just so. And history says that the ancient Scythians worshipped a scimitar — an appropriate deity for a barbaric and warlike race. This hexagon, stamped with the image of their god, would be holy in their eyes. It would be their altar-stone, and a necessary companion in all their migrations."

Beatrice, not doubting the truth of Idris' theory, gazed with a feeling almost akin to awe upon the mysterious stone, which the superstition of a far-off age had elevated to the rank of deity. Eternity seemed to be its attribute. In its presence she and Idris were but as the quickly-evaporating dew; long after their bodies should have

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crumbled to dust this altar would remain. A silent contemporary of the rise and fall of past empires, it would survive the rise and fall of many to come. If ever stone was eloquent on the evanescence of all things human, surely this stone was!

Such were Beatrice's thoughts, while Idris, more prosaic, was on his knees, removing the earth from the foot of the pillar, and scraping the surface of the stone with his penknife in the hope of finding runic letters engraved upon it: but in this he met with disappointment; each face of the hexagon was free from inscription.

"I was hoping," he said, rising to his feet, "to come upon some epitaph, such as, '*I, Magnus, raise this stone to the memory of my sire, Orm,*' which would give me proof that I am on the right track, since, after all, my opinion that this is the tomb of the Golden Viking is purely conjectural."

They descended to level ground again, and Idris proceeded to walk slowly around the base of the hillock, endeavouring to take no more than a foot at each step.

"The circumference is, roughly speaking, about one hundred and fifty feet," he remarked, when he had completed the circuit. "The diameter, therefore, will be about fifty, and the centre about twenty-five feet off."

"If you have that distance, or nearly that distance, of solid earth to bore through, you have a hard task," said Beatrice.

"My work will be of a much lighter nature, I trust. If this tumulus has been constructed like the generality of its kind, there should be a stone chamber in the centre with a stone passage leading to it from the side of the mound. Earth was piled over the mouth of the passage, but marks, usually taking the shape of two upright stones, were left to indicate the entrance."

"What point of the compass did the Norsemen

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favour when constructing the entrance-passage of their tumuli?"

"The point of ingress usually faced the east."

"This is the easternmost point, nearest the sea," said Beatrice, moving onward a few steps; and full of their enterprise, she cried, "Let us try to find the guide-stones."

They carefully surveyed the eastern curve of the base, Beatrice probing with the point of her sunshade, and Idris with the ferule of his walking-stick, among the long grass and bracken that grew in profusion at the foot of the hillock. Their search, however, was without result.

"I am at fault, it seems," said Idris, "or, it may be, the rain of centuries has washed down so much earth from the side of the mound that the guide-stones at its foot have become buried. We can do nothing without proper tools."

"Let us explore all round," suggested Beatrice, the spirit of adventure growing upon her.

They examined the entire circuit of the base, and, when that investigation was over, were no wiser than when they had begun.

Beatrice seated herself on a grassy bank facing the tumulus, and Idris took his place beside her.

"This will never do," he muttered, ruefully contemplating the hillock. "I *must* discover the mouth of the passage. If I begin to bore at any other point I might indeed reach the wall of the central chamber, but I should be on the outside, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make a way through the masonry. Besides, as I cannot admit the coöperation of any one but Godfrey, tunnelling through twenty feet of earth is a task that will take several nights, not to speak of the impossibility of concealing our work in the daytime."

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"Or the risk of your tunnel falling upon you, in which case," added Beatrice, demurely, "you would have *much ground* for complaint."

"Wicked Miss Ravengar! Would you jest at my misfortunes? I will defeat your hopes by finding the legitimate entrance."

"And how do you propose to find it?"

"Well, I conceive that the entrance is shaped like an ordinary doorway, that is to say, it consists of two upright stones a little distance apart, with a third resting horizontally upon them. I shall have to move round the base of the hillock with an iron implement, striking into the soil till I meet with stone. A little judicious probing will soon tell me whether it be a boulder, or one of the entrance-columns. If a boulder merely, I shall have to pass on, repeating my experiment."

"But if these entrance-columns stand well within the hillock you may go all round without lighting upon them."

"In that case I shall have to begin again, and strike deeper."

"Even then you may fail. You are arguing on the supposition that the mouth of the passage must be on a level with the base of the hillock, whereas it may be higher, six, nine, or twelve feet above level ground. And," pursued Beatrice, "if you conduct your operations in the manner you describe, it will be difficult to keep your work secret. The disturbed state of the soil, and the uprooting of the herbage, will tell a tale to the earl's bailiffs."

"Humph! these are difficulties which call for a cheroot," replied Idris. "You have no objection, Miss Ravengar? Thank you," he continued, lighting it. "Now to put on my thinking-cap."

Reclining upon the grass he puffed thoughtfully at his

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cheroot, and gazed at the green mound that seemed to be quietly mocking his endeavours.

"Ormfell appears determined to keep its secret," said Beatrice. "We want Belzoni here."

"Belzoni? 'I thank thee, Jew,'—or shall I say Jewess?—'for teaching me that word.' Shall an Italian find his way to the heart of the great stone pyramid, while I, an Englishman, am to be defeated by a paltry cone of earth, fifty feet only in diameter? Never!" he exclaimed, theatrically. "How," he continued, knitting his brows in perplexity, "how were the Norsemen themselves enabled to remember where the point of ingress lay? They must surely have left some mark to indicate it."

For the twentieth time that morning Idris murmured the inscription on the runic ring.

"'*Within the lofty tomb of thy sire, Orm the Golden, wilt thou find the treasure won by his high arm. The noontide shadow of the oft-carried throne will be to thee for a sign.*' How long am I to be baffled by this dark oracle? What is meant by the 'oft-carried throne'?"

The light of understanding suddenly leaped into Beatrice's eyes, and she pointed excitedly to the piece of basalt crowning the summit.

"Mr. Breakspear, are not the words 'oft-carried' very applicable to that stone, if it has really been brought over sea and land from the Crimea? Is not that the 'throne' alluded to?"

The cheroot dropped from Idris' lips, and he sprang to his feet with a cry of exultation.

"By heaven! Miss Ravengar, you are right. 'Oft-carried throne?' Yes, that must be it! As the holy *baitulion* of a tribe, marked with the image of their deity, it would doubtless be the stone on which the new chief would stand when invested with kingly rule. That

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piece of basalt was a kind of *Lia Fail*, like the coronation-stone at Westminster."

"Ormfell is becoming more interesting than ever," said Beatrice, her eyes sparkling with pleasure at having solved a problem that had perplexed Idris so long. "We have discovered the oft-carried throne, and the oft-carried throne is to be to us for a sign. A sign of what?"

"Indicative of the entrance, I presume, otherwise there would be no reason for engraving the fact on the ring."

"Do the words mean that the stone stands over the entrance itself? If we remove it, shall we discover the mouth of a shaft?"

"Scarcely, I think: for, if so, the stone would be a sign at all hours of the twenty-four, whereas the language of the ring restricts its significance to the noontide hour only."

"It wants an hour yet to noon," said Beatrice, referring to her watch.

"Good! We will wait till then. I have formed my opinion. Mark my words, Miss Ravengar, we shall find that the entrance is on the northern side. The noontide hour will show whether I am right."

And Idris, resuming his fallen cheroot, relighted it, and reclining once more upon the grassy bank, waited for the time to pass, while Beatrice sat beside him in a state of pleasing suspense.

"Now if my grandfather were here," she remarked, "he might be able to tell us whether or not Ormfell contains the treasure, without taking the trouble to break into the tumulus."

"Then your grandfather must have been a remarkably clever fellow."

"He was. By simply walking barefoot over the ground he was able to tell whether metals lay below, and not only that, but the depth even at which they lay. He

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has been known to point out and trace accurately the course of water, veins of metal, coal-measures, and the like."

"I have heard of similar feats performed by miners of the Hartz Mountains," said Idris, "but have always regarded such stories as apocryphal. Had your grandfather any theory to account for his marvellous power?"

"His idea was that the proximity of metals imparted a peculiar sensation to the soles of his feet, the intensity of the impression being a measure of their nearness to the surface. His belief was that metals cast off subtle exhalations capable of being detected by a highly magnetic organism, which his undoubtedly was."

"There may be something in that theory. There are persons who cannot enter the Mint without fainting."

"He always maintained," Beatrice went on, "that this valley of Ravensdale was the centre of a rich coalfield."

"Your grandfather's power of divining for metals has not descended to you and Godfrey, I presume?"

"I sometimes think it has — in a slight degree. We still keep his walking-stick cut from the witch-hazel. This stick would turn visibly in his hands at the proximity of metals; it has sometimes turned in Godfrey's hands, and more than once in mine."

"Strange! Well, if this stick is capable of being affected by metals let Godfrey by all means bring it with him to-night," said Idris, more in jest than in earnest. "The treasures of the Viking, supposing them to be still within the hillock, may lie concealed under the floor of the chamber, and we shall be at a loss to know at what point to dig for them."

The minutes moved tardily on, and as the meridian hour approached, Beatrice said:—

"Have you noticed how the shadow cast by the stone

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creeps slowly along over the face of the ground? This hillock could easily be turned into a giant sun-dial."

"You echo my thoughts, Miss Ravengar. And it seems to me that this shadow will furnish us with the clue we want."

"You mean that the shadow of the stone will fall on the very spot where the entrance is?"

"Not quite: for in that case the shadow would be an uncertain guide, varying with the sun's altitude at the different seasons: and, besides, you will notice that the shadow is many yards from the foot of the tumulus. It is not probable that the secret entrance lies so far off. No: my idea is this. Connect the oft-carried throne and its shadow with an ideal line, and near the point where this line cuts the base of the hillock will be found the mouth of the passage. It is the noontide hour now," continued Idris, rising. "We will put a little pile of stones to mark the spot where the apex of the shadow falls — so," he added, suiting the action to the word. "Now all we have to do is to walk from this point to the foot of the hillock, keeping in a bee-line with that piece of basalt on the summit, and, unless I err, we shall hit upon the entrance."

Speaking thus, Idris began his experiment. When he had come to the foot of the hillock, Beatrice observed with surprise that the thick, heavy walking-stick carried by him was in reality the receptacle for a long and stout sword. This weapon he pushed into the side of the hillock at the spot touched by the imaginary line.

After a series of probings, begun on a level with the ground and continued in an upward direction, Idris paused with a gleam of excitement on his face. Changing the direction, he resumed his probing, moving horizontally to the right and stopping again. Then he continued the movement, this time coming downward, so that

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the course of his sword had described three sides of a rectangle.

"Miss Ravengar," he cried, in a voice of emotion, "I have found the entrance! As I live, I have found it! Here, hidden within the soil, are two stone blocks a little distance apart, with a third resting crosswise upon them, the three forming a kind of doorway. We have only to remove the earth overlying them, and we shall find a hollow passage beyond."

Beatrice's cheek coloured with pleasure as Idris continued:—

"Miss Ravengar, you have proved yourself a valuable auxiliary. But for your explanation I might still be puzzling my mind as to the meaning of 'the oft-carried throne.' I offer you a somewhat problematic reward. Whatever spoil is found within shall be divided equally between us."

"*Merci!* But are you not promising too much? Is not treasure-trove the property of the Crown?"

"Provided that the Crown hears of the discovery."

"Fie, Mr. Breakspear! you would corrupt my honesty."

"I can depart now with a hopeful heart for to-night's work. I shall have but little difficulty in penetrating to the interior of the hillock. We have no need to mark the entrance. Nature has already done it for us."

He pointed to a cluster of white flowers growing upon the side of the hillock. Beatrice had no sooner set eyes upon them than an expression of surprise stole over her face.

"Do you know the name of this flower?" she said.

"It is the vernal mandrake."

"What? The mandragora of the ancients?—the plant that played so potent a factor in classic witchcraft?"

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"The same."

Idris gazed with considerable interest upon the pale mysterious plant around which so many weird superstitions have gathered.

"And a curious circumstance it is," continued Beatrice, who was somewhat of a botanist, "that it should be growing here."

"Why so?"

"Because it is a plant requiring cultivation. It does not grow wild, at least not in this country."

"Then your inference is that it has been planted here by human agency?"

"Sown is perhaps a better word than planted. It certainly did not spring up spontaneously from the soil."

"Hum! This raises a curious question. For what purpose was it sown? Is some one carrying on botanic experiments here? Or shall we say that my projected visit to the interior of the tumulus has been forestalled, and my unknown forerunner, desirous of renewing his visit at an early date, has left these tokens here to mark the point of entrance, probably having had the same difficulty as ourselves in discovering it? What simpler plan could he adopt than just to sprinkle here a few seeds of the white-flowering mandrake?"

Beatrice had nothing to say either for or against this last theory, and, after puzzling themselves in vain to account for the presence of the mandrake, they set off for Ormsby.

On their way they passed a small workshop belonging to the cemetery-mason. The man himself was standing at the door, and Beatrice stopped to exchange a few civilities with him.

"Well, Robin, how is the world using you?" she asked pleasantly.

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"Rather badly of late. The people of Ormsby seem to live longer than they used to do."

"I am afraid my brother is partly responsible for that," said Beatrice demurely. "It is his business to oppose yours, you see."

"No one seems to want a tombstone nowadays," continued the man gloomily. "However, I had a little work put in my way yesterday by Mademoiselle Rivière."

"Mademoiselle Rivière!" echoed Beatrice in surprise. "What order has *she* given you?"

"You have perhaps heard that more than twenty years ago an unknown vessel was wrecked in Ormsby Race. Four bodies only were washed ashore, and these were buried in a corner of St. Oswald's churchyard. Mademoiselle Rivière has obtained permission of the Rector to place a marble cross over their grave."

"Did she say why she takes such an interest in these drowned men?" asked Beatrice.

"Well, as to that I was a little bit curious myself, and so I could not help putting a question or two. Mademoiselle said she had good reason for believing that the lost vessel was French: and being French herself she felt a desire to honour their grave. If you will step inside, I will show you what she has chosen."

Idris, who felt a strange interest in Mademoiselle Rivière, required no second bidding, and with Beatrice entered the workshop, where the mason exhibited with manifest pride a cross of Sicilian marble, standing on a base of the same material. This pedestal was wrought in the shape of a rock, and decorated with seaweed and an anchor.

"What is the epitaph to be?" asked Idris, after some words complimentary to the mason's skill.

The man produced a paper upon which was written,

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in the same delicate, flowing penmanship that had adorned the margin of the Lombard historian, the following words:—

"SACRED

TO THE MEMORY

OF

THE DROWNED.

OCTOBER 13TH, 1876.

'He that is without sin, let him first cast the stone.'"

Idris laid down the paper, and, after a few more words with the mason, the two went on their way again.

"Mademoiselle Rivière must know something more about those shipwrecked men than that they were Frenchmen merely," observed Idris. "If the verse cited is to have any application at all, it must mean that the drowned men were guilty of—I know not what, but something upon which the world would not look leniently. Hence, perhaps, the absence of their names from the epitaph."

"You think she knows their names?"

"Without doubt. Why should a lady erect a costly memorial over the grave of men of whom she knows nothing? If I may venture a conjecture I should say that she must be related to one of them. 'He that is without sin, let him first cast the stone.' I have often thought that that verse might very well form a part of my father's epitaph."

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CHAPTER VI

"THE FIRES OF THE ASAS!"

MIDNIGHT was chiming from a distant church-tower as Idris and Godfrey stood on the edge of the upland that overlooked the valley of Ravensdale.

They had left Wave Crest at eleven o'clock, and following a circuitous route, and favoured by the late hour, had succeeded in reaching their destination without attracting notice.

Beatrice had begged hard to accompany them, but this Godfrey would not permit. So she watched them from the garden-gate till they were out of sight, and then returned indoors to alarm herself by reading the adventures of Belzoni in the Great Pyramid, finding some sort of affinity between the expedition of Idris and that of the enterprizing Paduan.

The night was lovely and cloudless, with a full moon shining from a sky of darkest blue.

Shimmering white in the hallowed radiance arose the lofty tomb of the long-buried Viking, and as the two friends made their way towards it the character of the undertaking began to oppress the mind of Godfrey with various strange fancies. What the interior of the hillock would reveal he could not tell; but he had forebodings of something grim and ghostly. Though it was of his own free will that he came, yet now, brought close to the intended task, he shrank from it, and found himself yielding to a spirit of fear.

He could not but admire the unconcern of his com-

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panion, who strode gallantly forward, humming the chorus of a hunting-song.

"Confound yon bright moon!" muttered Idris. "If any of the coast-guard should stroll this way, we are certain to be seen."

Arrived at the northernmost point of the tumulus, he flung down the sack that he had carried containing the implements necessary for excavation, and turning his eyes upon the side of the hillock began to look about for the white-flowering mandrake that betokened the point of ingress.

He glanced quickly from right to left, but, to his surprise, the plant was nowhere to be seen.

"Here's a mystery! What has become of the mandrake?—No matter: there's the pile of pebbles I set up on the spot where the shadow of the stone fell. I have but to repeat my former experiment."

Making his way to the little heap Idris faced about, and then began to walk towards the hillock, keeping in a direct line with the stone upon its apex.

On reaching the base of the tumulus he paused and remained stationary, with his back to Godfrey, and his gaze riveted on the side of the mound. There was something so peculiar in the rigidity of his attitude, and in his long-continued silence, that Godfrey's heart quickened with an unknown fear, a fear that deepened, when Idris, with a scared face turned slowly round, and, as if the power of speech had left him, beckoned with his finger for the surgeon to come forward.

"Look there!" he said in a hoarse voice, clutching Godfrey with one hand, and pointing with the other. "Tell me whether I see aright. What's that?"

And there, protruding from the side of the hillock in the place where the mandrake had grown, was—a human hand!

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The Viking's Skull

A human hand, rising from the earth, motionless and rigid, the crooked fingers seeming to tell of the agony of a death by suffocation.

Some one, since the morning, had been trying to force a way through the soil at the entrance of the passage, and had lost his life in the attempt.

Such was Idris' first thought. A closer inspection, however, showed that the event had not happened that day. The nails had fallen from the fingers, and there was, besides, a decayed, vegetable look about the hand, differing altogether from the aspect presented by the skin of the newly-dead. How Idris came to overlook it during his morning visit was a mystery, since the hand must have been in its present position for several days, if not for several weeks. Its sudden exposure was perhaps due to the afternoon storm, which had washed away a portion of the soil.

To endeavour to ascertain the identity of the victim by pulling at the withered hand, and thus bringing the decayed form to view, was an act that not only Idris shrank from, but even Godfrey, the surgeon, familiar with the *disjecta membra* of the dissecting room.

Then Idris, bending forward to examine the hand more closely, gave vent to a peal of laughter.

"Brave heroes we are to be frightened by a plant! It is nothing but the root of the mandrake."

Godfrey drew a breath of relief, as he assured himself by a nearer view that what he had taken for a human hand was indeed the withered root of the mandrake, so apt to assume strange and unaccountable shapes.

Yet, to save his life, he durst not put forth his hand to touch it.

If such were the terrors guarding the exterior of the tomb, what might he not expect to find in the interior?

"Now, Godfrey, our silly fright being over, to work!

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