



***FRED
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***THE MIDNIGHT
GUEST***

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The Midnight Guest

A Detective Story

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CHAPTER I.

AT WHOSE HAND?

A hansom pulled up in front of 799, Park Lane, and a slim figure of a woman, dressed in deep mourning, ran up the broad flight of marble steps leading to the house. Her features were closely concealed by a thick veil, so that the footman who answered the ring could make nothing of the visitor. Her voice was absolutely steady as she asked to see Lord Ravenspur at once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The footman collected his scattered wits, and stammered out some kind of apology. There were other newsboys racing down the Lane now. It seemed as if London was ringing with the name of Louis Delahay. Then the great double doors of the big house closed sullenly and shut out the horrid sound. At any other time the veiled woman might have been free to admire the luxury and extravagant good taste of her surroundings. There were many people who regarded Lord Ravenspur as the most fortunate and talented man in London. Not only had he been born to the possession of a fine old title, but he had almost unlimited wealth as well. As if this were not sufficient, Nature had endowed him with a handsome presence and an intellect far beyond the common. Apparently there was nothing that Ravenspur could not do. He was a fine sportsman, and a large number of his forty odd years had been spent big game shooting abroad. What time he passed in England was devoted almost exclusively to artistic pursuits. As a portrait painter Ravenspur stood on a level with the great masters of his time. More than one striking example of sculpture had come from his chisel. He had as much honour in the Salons of

Vienna and Paris as he had within the walls of Burlington House. In fine, Ravenspur was a great personage, a popular figure in society, and well known everywhere. His lavish hospitality was always in the best of good taste, and the *entrée* to 799, Park Lane was accounted a rare privilege by all his friends.

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

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

For a few moments she paced up and down, weaving her way in and out amongst the rare objects of art like a wild animal that is freshly caged. She threw back her long, black veil presently as if the atmosphere of the place stifled her. Her face might have been that of a marble statue, so intensely white and rigid it was. It was only the rapid dilation of the dark eyes which showed that the stranger had life and feeling at all. She turned abruptly as Lord Ravenspur came into the room. His handsome, smiling face and prematurely iron-grey hair afforded a strong contrast to the features of his visitor. He came forward with extended hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My dear friend, I couldn't. I must be walking about. I feel as if I could walk about for years. But I will try and tell you how it happened. He came back to London yesterday afternoon, as you know, and put up at the Grand Hotel. You see, I had never been in London before, and so I know nothing at all about it. If we had only gone straight to our own house in Fitzjohn Square this dreadful thing--but why do I think of that? You know the house was not quite ready for us, and that was the reason why we went to the Grand. After visiting a theatre last night Louis announced his intention of going as far as our house. I understood him to say that he required something from his studio. There were no caretakers on the premises, but Louis had a latchkey, so

that was all right. I went to bed about twelve o'clock, thinking no evil, and not in the least alarmed because Louis had not come back. As you know, he had always been a terribly late man, and I thought perhaps he had met one of his old companions, or perhaps he had turned into the Garrick Club. Still, when I woke up this morning about six, and found that he had not returned, I became genuinely alarmed. I took a cab as far as Fitzjohn Square, and went into the house."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

NO. 1 FITZJOHN SQUARE

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

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

"That is very good of you," Ravenspur murmured. "As far as I am concerned I should like to make some inquiries. I have known Delahay now for the last five years; indeed, it was I who persuaded him to take up his quarters in London.

It seems a terrible thing that so promising a career should be cut short like this. That man would have come to the top of his profession, and, so far as I know, he hadn't a single enemy in the world. Perhaps, by this time, the Scotland Yard people may have found a clue."

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

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

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

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

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

"At any rate, they were not after your lordship," the inspector said, thoughtfully. "Of course, I am assuming for the sake of argument that the murderer, or murderers, were

actually here when you arrived last night. If so, the whole thing was carefully premeditated. These people had no quarrel with you, and, therefore, they did not molest you. All the same, they wanted to get rid of you, or they would not have cut off the light."

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

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

Ravenspur followed his companion down the dark steps leading to the basement, and Inspector Dallas struck a light. Then, with a grim smile, he pointed to a cable which led from the meter to the different rooms on the upper floors. The cable had been clean cut with some sharp instrument, a fracture which must have been recently made, for the main wire to the cable gleamed like gold.

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

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

"Simply because they could afford to wait till half-past one. You may depend upon it that Mr. Delahay's movements

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

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

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

"Ah, but that won't quite do," Ravenspur protested. "When I came out of the house this morning I saw that the front door was carefully fastened, and I am prepared to swear that the latchkey which Mrs. Delahay found this morning was not in the lock then. No, no; I am quite sure that poor Delahay must have come here after I left. I am not prepared to contest your theory that my unfortunate friend came here to keep an appointment. Indeed, the presence of the latchkey in the door proves that he was in a hurry, and

perhaps a little upset, or he would not have committed the mistake of leaving the key behind him. But after all, said and done, this is merely conjecture on our part. Have you found anything yourself that is likely to give you a clue?"

Inspector Dallas hesitated just for a moment.

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, no," Dallas said, after a short pause. "There is nothing that strikes me, no suggestions that seem to need a doctor's opinion. We shall find that the cause of death is the small puncture over the heart that I spoke of. To hazard an opinion, it might be caused by one of those glass stiletto--the Corsican type of weapon where the blade is snapped off in the wound. It leaves the smallest mark, and no blood

follows--a difficult thing to trace without great care. Of course, the *post mortem*----"

CHAPTER III.

THE MARK OF THE BEAST.

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

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

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

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

Without waiting for any reply from his companion Ravenspur quitted the room, and went back to his brougham. He threw himself into a corner, and pulled his hat over his eyes. For a long time he sat there immersed in deep and painful thought, and utterly unconscious of his surroundings. Even when the brougham pulled up in Park Lane he made no attempt to dismount till the footman opened the door and addressed him by name.

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

The neat, clean-shaven secretary came forward.

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

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

disappointed. In the meantime, I am not at home to anybody."

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

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

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

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

paragraphs contained nothing new. The only point that interested the reader was the medical evidence.

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

For the moment, however, the great puzzle was to discover how the murderer had been aware that he would be in a position to find his victim at Fitzjohn Square. It was proved conclusively enough that Louis Delahay had come back to England on the spur of the moment, and that equally on the spur of the moment he had made up his mind to visit his house, and, therefore, nobody could possibly have known besides his wife when he had left the

Grand Hotel. On this point public curiosity would have to wait, seeing that Mrs. Delahay was in no condition to explain. In fact, she was in the hands of a medical man who had prescribed absolute quiet for the present.

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

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

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

"There is no real 'resemblance,'" Ravenspur laughed, "though people are constantly making absurd mistakes. It is excusable to mistake one for the other in the dark, but not in the daylight. Besides, Seton is a much taller man than I am, and much slimmer. We should hear nothing about this

likeness, but for certain gentlemen of the Press who make their living out of little paragraphs."

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S FACE.

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

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

Ravenspur spoke in hot indignation; in fact, he was slightly overdoing it. He fussed about Seton, and insisted that the latter should go up to his room, which suggestion

the guest waived aside. He was the far more collected of the two.

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

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

To the casual observer there was no sign of trouble or tragedy here. Everything was perfect in its way. The oval table glittered with silver and old Bohemian glass. The banks of flowers might have been arranged by the master hand of an artist. Ravenspur sat there gaily enough now, his conversation gleaming with wit and humour, the most perfect host in London. There was no sign whatever of his earlier agitation. And yet, strive as he would, from time to time the name of Louis Delahay crept into the conversation. It was in vain that Lord Ravenspur attempted to turn the stream of thought into other channels. He was glad enough

at length when the dinner came to an end, and the party of guests broke up into little groups. The host approached Seton presently with a request to know whether he would care to play bridge or not.

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

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

The suggestion was received with general approval, and a move was immediately made in the direction of the studio. The apartment lay at the end of a long corridor, which cut it off from the rest of the house, the studio being in reality a huge garden room, which Ravenspur had built for reasons of privacy. He took a latchkey from his pocket and opened the door.

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

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

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

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

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

As he spoke Ravenspur switched on the electric lights, until the whole of the beautiful apartment glowed to the illumination of the shaded lamps. The studio itself was circular in shape, and finished in a great dome of stained glass. The floor was littered with rare old Persian carpets, and lounges from all parts of the world were dotted about here and there. Round the walls was an almost unique collection of armour. From the centre of the floor rose a fine acacia tree, the vivid green foliage of which seemed to suffer nothing from being cut off from the outer light and air. Altogether the place was quite unique in its way, and striking evidence of Ravenspur's originality and good taste. On little tables here and there were hundreds of photographs, most of them signed, testifying to the great popularity which Ravenspur enjoyed amongst all classes of society.

"You will have to leave these to the Nation," a guest laughed. "What a cosmopolitan gallery it is--a prince on the one side, and a prominent socialist on the other! Yet, after

all, photographs are very commonplace things. You might look over a thousand before your fancy is taken by a face like this."

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

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

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

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

"The apology is mine," Ravenspur put in quickly. "I was annoyed, just for the moment, to think that that portrait should have been left about. I could have sworn that I had locked it carefully away in a safe. You are perfectly right, my dear Seymour, there is a tragedy behind that charming face. But you will quite understand that I cannot discuss the matter with anybody."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V.

VERA RAYNE.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "One gets tired of going out every night. And it was rather dull. I daresay all this sounds very ungrateful when you give me everything I could desire. But I am longing to get into the country again. It seems almost a crime for people to shut themselves up in dusty

London, when the country is looking at its very best. Do you know, I was far happier when I was down in Hampshire."

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

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

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

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

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

"What does it matter?" Lance asked. "What does it matter so long as I--so long as we all care for you. My dear