

ifornia
onal
ity



THE
VIKING'S SKULL

By
JOHN R. CARLING

104

104

The Viking's Skull



The Viking's Skull

By

John R. Carling

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

Boston
Little, Brown, and Company

1904

Copyright, 1903, 1904
BY LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY.

All rights reserved

Published March, 1904

HUBLEY PRINTING CO. L^TD
TYPESETTERS AND ELECTROTYPERS
YORK, PA., U. S. A.

PRESSWORK BY
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, U. S. A.

Contents

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. "THE ENGLISH LADY"	1
II. THE RUNIC RING	11
III. A RETROSPECT	18
IV. TRAGEDY!	26

THE STORY

I. THE RAVENGARS OF RAVENHALL	44
II. THE MYSTERY OF THE RELIQUARY	57
III. IDRIS REDIVIVUS	70
IV. THE SECRET OF THE RUNIC RING	82
V. "THE SHADOW OF THE OFT-CARRIED ' THRONE"	92
VI. "THE FIRES OF THE ASAS!"	106
VII. "WITHIN THE LOFTY TOMB"	119
VIII. LORELIE RIVIÈRE	132
IX. IDRIS MEETS A RIVAL	150
X. A LITTLE PIECE OF STEEL	165
XI. THE LEGEND OF THE RUNIC RING	178
XII. IDRIS DECLARES HIS LOVE	197
XIII. AT LORELIE'S VILLA	209

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. TOLD BY THE VASE	232
XV. A PACKET OF OLD LETTERS	245
XVI. LORELIE AT RAVENHALL	264
XVII. THE SECRET OF THE FUNERAL CRYPT	277
XVIII. A CRANIOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT	300
XIX. THE VENGEANCE OF THE SKULL	318
XX. FINALE	344

List of Illustrations

- “The humming sea, as if bent on securing its victims,
came foaming with threatening rapidity” . . . *Frontispiece*
- “A dagger flashed from beneath his cloak” *Page 33*
- “A cry of surprise, rather than of alarm, broke from
him, as he caught sight of a full-sized human skel-
eton lying within” “ 123
- “‘By the sacred ring of Odin, stolen by you from
Edith Breakspear, I adjure you, speak! Whose
skull is this?’” “ 336

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

The Viking's Skull

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

“The English Lady”

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?”

The Viking's Skull

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.

“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 Pêcheurs* 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.

The Viking's Skull

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

“The English Lady”

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.”

The Viking's Skull

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 Cru-soes," Idris called them, nor was the name inappropriate.

“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

The Viking's Skull

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.

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."

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?"

The Runic Ring

“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

The Viking's Skull

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."

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.

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

The Runic Ring

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!"

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

A Retrospect

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

The Viking's Skull

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 Finistère 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.

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 Pêcheurs*.

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

The Viking's Skull

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'Étoile 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

A Retrospect

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

The Viking's Skull

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.

A Retrospect

“ 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? ”

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.

Tragedy!

“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.

The Viking's Skull

“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.”

Tragedy!

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

The Viking's Skull

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.

Tragedy!

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

The Viking's Skull

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?"



Tragedy!

“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.

The Viking's Skull

“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

Tragedy!

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

The Viking's Skull

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

Tragedy!

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."

The Viking's Skull

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?"

Tragedy!

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

The Viking's Skull

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-

Tragedy!

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

The Viking's Skull

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

Tragedy!

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

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.

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 historiç 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,

The Viking's Skull

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.

The Ravengars of Ravenhall

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

The Viking's Skull

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.

The Ravengars of Ravenhall

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.

The Viking's Skull

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

The Ravengars of Ravenhall

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-

The Viking's Skull

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.

The Ravengars of Ravenhall

“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

The Viking's Skull

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,

The Ravengars of Ravenhall

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 règle*, 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, he blew again, but this time more gently.

The Viking's Skull

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.

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?"

The Viking's Skull

"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

The Mystery of the Reliquary

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."

The Viking's Skull

"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-

The Mystery of the Reliquary

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,

The Viking's Skull

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.

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

The Viking's Skull

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.

The Mystery of the Reliquary

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,

The Viking's Skull

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.

The Mystery of the Reliquary

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,

The Viking's Skull

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-

The Mystery of the Reliquary

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.

CHAPTER III

IDRIS REDIVIVUS

“**I**VAR 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 handwriting 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-

Idris Redivivus

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.

The Viking's Skull

“ 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.”

Idris Redivivus

“ 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

The Viking's Skull

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-

Idris Redivivus

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 Ravensgars ? ”

“ 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

The Viking's Skull

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

Idris Redivivus

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

The Viking's Skull

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.

Idris Redivivus

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.*"

The Viking's Skull

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

Idris Redivivus

book you'll scarcely meet with once in a lifetime. Quite a thrilling work, no doubt, to antiquaries of the Dryasdust 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!"

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.

The Secret of the Runic Ring

“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?”

The Viking's Skull

“ 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 :—✱. “ It is called *Hagl*, and corresponds to our H. As it is slightly larger than the other letters,

The Secret of the Runic Ring

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

The Viking's Skull

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."

The Secret of the Runic Ring

“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.”

The Viking's Skull

"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

The Secret of the Runic Ring

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.

The Viking's Skull

“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. Traveling 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

The Secret of the Runic Ring

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 tomorrow, 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.

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.

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

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

The Viking's Skull

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

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

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

The Viking's Skull

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."

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

“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 che-root,” 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

The Viking's Skull

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

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

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

The Viking's Skull

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 coal-field."

"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

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

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

The Viking's Skull

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?"

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

“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.

The Viking's Skull

"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,

“The Shadow of the Oft-Carried Throne”

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.”

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 enterprising 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-

“The Fires of the Asas!”

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!

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 *dissecta 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!

“The Fires of the Asas !”

I will dig while you watch. Take a seat on this boulder here, and if you should see anybody coming, give the word and I will suspend operations for a while. There cannot be more than five or six feet of earth to knock away, and then the passage will be open to our view. The work ought not to take long.”

Godfrey did as desired, and Idris flung off ulster, coat, and vest. Rolling his shirt-sleeves above the elbow, he drew the tools from the sack and selected a spade.

“Now to disturb the repose of old Orm the Golden !” he cried, excitement sparkling from his eyes. “Now to evoke the fires of the Asas !”

The sickly, withered mandrake-root, with its resemblance to a human hand, fronted him, and as if in contempt of his former fears, he drove the edge of the spade clean through the stalk. The separated parts seemed to quiver and writhe in a manner extremely suggestive of animal-life.

A thrill of terror shot through his frame, and, spade in hand, he paused, staring at the root; for, simultaneously with its dissection, there came a sound, bearing resemblance to a plaintive human cry.

It was not the creation of his fancy, since Godfrey too had heard it.

“In the name of all that’s holy what was that ?” he asked, starting up from the stone upon which he had been sitting.

“That is what I should like to know,” said Idris, trying to look unconcerned. “It came—or seemed to come—from this plant here. The poet speaks of:—

‘Shrieks like mandrakes torn from the ground !’

but I never thought to hear them in my own person.”

The Viking's Skull

He toyed idly with the spade, desirous, yet almost afraid, of making a second stroke.

In all his life Godfrey had never been so much alarmed as he was at that moment.

"Idris, let us leave this business — at least, for to-night."

His words acted as a stimulus to the other's courage.

"Leave it? Never! till I have forced my way to the heart of this hillock, and wrested the secret from it. On the very point of discovery must we turn back, frightened by a sound, the cry, probably, of some night-bird? We are not the first to break into a Norse barrow at midnight. Shall we be outdone in enterprise by others? No: though the dead Viking rise up, sword in hand, to repel me, yet will I go on."

And with this Idris lifted the spade, and attacked the side of the hillock, savagely cutting the mandrake root to fragments, half expecting to hear the weird cry again. But the sound, whatever its origin, was not repeated.

Finding the earth to be hard conglomerate, and not easily susceptible to impressions from the spade, Idris laid that tool aside, and, fitting the wooden shaft of a pickaxe into its iron head, proceeded to reduce the conglomerate to a crumble, which he then tossed aside with the spade, labouring alternately with the two implements.

No word escaped him: he was too much interested in the work to waste his breath in words. His efforts soon unearthed two large unhewn blocks of stone standing a little distance apart.

Fired to fresh energy by this sight, a proof that he was working in the right direction, he continued his excavations between the two blocks. After the lapse of a few minutes he paused, and thrust his arm up to the shoulder through an aperture appearing in the conglomerate.

"*Io triumphe!*" he exclaimed. "Empty space behind

“The Fires of the Asas!”

this. A little more labour, and we shall be able to crawl into the passage beyond.”

Declining Godfrey's repeated offers of assistance, Idris resumed his work enthusiastically, dealing stroke after stroke upon the wall of earth that barred his way. Down came the black soil with a rush, as if glad to meet free air after an imprisonment of centuries. Wider and wider grew the aperture, revealing an open space beyond: and, at last, flinging down his tools, Idris declared that the way was now open to the interior.

“Where's the lantern, Godfrey?”

The surgeon was already fumbling about in the sack. With an exclamation of dismay he rose to his feet and gave it a shake, but nothing came forth.

“By heaven! Godfrey, don't say that we have left the lantern behind!”

“That is just what we have done.”

“At least, the match-box is there.”

“No: that, too, is a minus article.”

Idris breathed a malediction. As he himself had attended to the putting up of their paraphernalia, the omission was his own, and no blame attached to Godfrey.

The neglect seemed irremediable. It was out of the question to return to Ormsby for the lantern, and yet, without a light, it would be hazardous to grope their way through darkness to the interior of the hillock. To be so near the point of discovery, and yet so far off, was maddening.

“I shall not return without some attempt at exploration,” cried Idris. “We'll have to grope about in the dark and try what we can discover in that way.”

Godfrey was almost ready to drop at this weird suggestion.

“Stay a moment!” continued Idris, stooping over his vest, and feeling in the pockets, “surely I have some

The Viking's Skull

matches here. Yes," he added, with a cry of delight, drawing forth a metallic box. "Here they are! How many? Three, as I live! Three only! Humph! we shall have to economize our slender resources. We must feel our way along the passage. I'll walk a few steps ahead of you, so that if any hurt should befall me, take warning yourself, and help me if you can. We'll not strike these vestas till we are fairly within the central chamber. We may learn something from their glimmer."

Idris, having resumed his coat and vest, was on the point of leading the way, when he suddenly became impressed with the idea that there might be some hidden danger within the hillock, and for Beatrice's sake it was not right that Godfrey should be drawn into it.

But the surgeon, though indeed reluctant to go forward, was nevertheless unwilling to be considered a coward, and demurred to the suggestion that he should remain at the entrance till Idris had first paid a visit to the interior.

"Seriously speaking," said Idris, "I do not see what danger there can be, but still there *is* the possibility of it, and I ought to meet it alone. Beatrice would never forgive me if harm should befall you. Stay here till I have made a brief exploration."

While speaking he caught sight of the walking-stick with which Godfrey's grandfather had been accustomed to perform his feats of divination. It was curiously shaped, carved so as to represent a serpent twining round a wand, the head of the reptile being set with two green, glittering stones in imitation of eyes.

"Pass me your ancestral *caduceus*," he said. "It will serve to guide my steps. I wish these eyes were lamps!"

Then, waving the surgeon back, he stepped within the dark hole, which seemed, in Godfrey's imagination, to gape like the mouth of a great dragon about to swallow its victim.

“The Fires of the Asas!”

Idris' sensations on entering the passage were far from agreeable. Though the moonlight without was brilliantly white, not a ray of it found entrance to the passage; the air within was black and terrible, and as solid-looking as if formed of ebony.

His progress was slow and tedious, from the necessity imposed upon him of halting at each step to feel his way. Before lifting his foot he carefully explored the ground in front of him with the stick, and he touched in turn the sides of the passage as well as the roof. The corridor, judged by this test, was about seven feet in height and four in width. Roof, walls, and flooring were composed apparently of solid masonry.

After taking about twenty paces Idris, extending the rod on each side of him, found that it touched nothing. The passage had opened out into something wider.

He judged that he had entered the mortuary chamber, and was now standing in the presence of the dead.

What awesome sight did the black darkness hide?

For all he knew to the contrary, not one, but many Vikings might be entombed here, disposed at different points of the chamber, their bodies preserved from decay by embalming. Like the lost and frozen dead men, seen sometimes by navigators in northern seas, they might be in sitting posture, staring with fixed and glassy eyes as if daring him to advance.

The temptation to obtain a glimpse of the place by striking one of the matches was very great, but he refrained from the action, resolving that Godfrey should share the sight.

Before calling upon him to follow, a sudden desire came upon Idris to grope his way once around the interior.

Exploring the darkness with his stick he soon hit upon the chamber-wall at the point where it shot off at right

The Viking's Skull

angles to the side of the passage. Passing his hand over its surface, an action accompanied on his part by a feeling of disgust, the masonry being wet and slimy, he discovered what seemed to be a rusty rod extending in a horizontal line along the wall at the height of about six feet from the ground. Puzzled at first to account for its use he came to the conclusion that it had once served to uphold the tapestry with which the interiors of these old Norse tombs were sometimes decorated. The tapestry itself was gone, crumbled to dust, perhaps, with the lapse of time, but the metallic rod remaining would serve to conduct him round the chamber.

He shot a glance through the passage just traversed by him: the darkness swallowed up its perspective, rendering it impossible for the eye to form any judgment as to its length. The entrance seemed close by, a square patch of white light, in which was framed a dark stooping figure, that of Godfrey, vainly endeavouring to keep an eye on his venturesome friend.

Idris turned from the passage, and holding the rod with his left hand, and grasping the stick in his right, he advanced slowly and cautiously along the side of the chamber-wall, over ground that had, perhaps, been untrampled for ten centuries.

After taking six paces he was brought to a halt by the wall inclining again at right angles. He had evidently reached one corner of the stone chamber.

Turning his face in this new direction, and still submitting to the guidance of the supposed tapestry-rod, he continued his progress, exploring the way before him with the stick.

He paused again as his left hand came in contact with a small triangular shred of cloth hanging to the rod. It was apparently a fragment of tapestry. There might be other and larger portions farther on, which, in view of

“The Fires of the Asas!”

their antiquity, would be of considerable value. Pleased with the idea that he would not come away from the tomb altogether empty-handed he was about to move forward again, when his attention was suddenly diverted to the stick he was carrying.

Without the exercise of any volition on his part it was slowly inclining itself downwards. There was no mistaking the fact, and the knowledge came upon him as a disagreeable surprise. It was as if the serpent-rod had suddenly become instinct with life.

His first impulse was to cast it from him, but thinking that its downward motion might be due to the relaxed state of his muscles, he raised and extended the stick horizontally: he kept it in that position, but it was evident to his sense of feeling that the rod manifested a tendency to assume an oblique direction, just as if a thread were tied to its extremity, and some one below lightly pulling it.

What was the cause of this? Must he dismiss his former scepticism, and believe in the powers of the divining rod? Had this staff of witch-hazel, electrified by the nervous force of his own body, become transformed for the moment into a sort of magnet, capable of being attracted by metals? Was he standing on the site of the Viking's buried treasure? Was the very treasure itself lying upon the clay flooring at his feet? If he struck a match would his eye be caught by the sparkle of silver and gold? No: he would reserve the light, and make what discoveries he could without it.

Relinquishing his hold of the metallic rod he dropped upon his knees, and with his face bent low, put forth his hands.

* * * * *

Hark! What was that?

The silent watcher at the entrance started.

The Viking's Skull

A faint cry from the interior of the hillock as of one calling for help, and then stillness.

For some time Godfrey had kept his ear close to the flooring of the passage, a position which enabled him to follow the footsteps of Idris. But now these footsteps had ceased, their cessation being followed shortly afterwards by the cry.

Godfrey continued to listen, but though straining his ear to the utmost he could not detect the faintest sound. A suspiciously horrible stillness prevailed within.

"Idris! Idris!" he called out, sending the full volume of his voice along the passage: and "Idris! Idris!" was echoed from the roof in tones that seemed like a mockery of his own. If the dead in the sepulchral chamber were gibing at him the effect could not have been more weird.

Again he called aloud, and again there was no answer, save the echoes of his own voice.

"My God! what has happened?" he cried.

There fell upon him a terror like that which has turned men's hair grey in a single night. He did not doubt, he *could* not doubt, that some disaster had happened: he must hasten to the rescue: duty, humanity, friendship, honour—all these blending together in a voice of thunder urged him forward. Every moment was precious; and yet to venture into the dark chamber without a light seemed a piece of folly, for what was there to prevent him from meeting with the same fate as Idris?

He rose to his feet and turned his eyes towards the cliffs and sea-beach in the hope of seeing a coast-guard whose lantern would at this juncture be of inestimable service. But alas! no coast-guard was visible, and to go off in search of one was out of the question, when a minute might make all the difference between life and death.

No: he must venture in alone, and without a light, and he nerved himself for the task. Casting one glance

“The Fires of the Asas !”

at the sky, the sea, the land, as objects he might never see again, he snatched up the pickaxe to serve as a weapon of defence, against he knew not whom or what, and plunged into the mouth of the excavation that yawned black and grim before him.

His course through the passage was much quicker than that of Idris had been. There could be no danger here, seeing that Idris had traversed it in safety. Therefore the surgeon groped his way swiftly along the wall of the corridor until it suddenly turned off at right angles, whence he concluded that he was at the entrance of the sepulchral chamber.

“Idris, where are you ?” he cried.

There was no vocal reply, but a faint splash greeted his ears like the movement of a hand through water, a sound which Godfrey interpreted as an answer.

For a terrible idea had seized him. The floor of the chamber was of earth only, and not of masonry, he thought : and the rain of centuries, percolating through the roof, had converted this flooring into a quagmire incapable of supporting the lightest weight. Idris had become immersed in it : had just sunk below the surface : his voice was gone : he had just given his last gasp !

How was he to save him ? One step forward, and he himself might be in the abyss of mud.

To test his opinion he flung the pickaxe forward, taking care to avoid the spot whence came the splash. As it fell Godfrey drew a breath of relief. The clangour made by the falling implement proved that the quagmire was the creation of his fancy. Still, what had become of Idris that he made no reply ? He must be somewhere within this chamber, seeing that there was no egress from it except by the passage. O for a light, if only that of a match ! Its momentary gleam would suffice to dispel the mystery.

The Viking's Skull

He listened for Idris' breathing, but failed to detect any sound: Idris, if he were really here, was as still as the dead.

There was no other course for Godfrey than to grope about until he came upon the body of Idris, an unpleasant task, seeing that it might bring him into contact with the bones of Vikings!

He started forward at random. Five paces, and his knee knocked against some obstruction. Putting out his hand he ascertained that directly in front of him was something formed of hewn stone.

With an instinctive feeling that this was a tomb, Godfrey gave it a wide range, and in so doing stumbled and fell over another object.

It was a human body. In a moment Godfrey was upon his knees, and passing his hand quickly over the prostrate figure he discovered that it was Idris in a state of coma.

Quickly he felt for the match-box which Idris had put into his vest pocket, and on finding it, drew it forth. Taking out one of the wax-lights he struck it on the side of the box.

Never within Godfrey's experience had the striking of a match been attended with a result so appalling, for he immediately found himself in an atmosphere of many-coloured flame. The hot breath of a fiery furnace glowed around, dazzling his eyes, scorching his face.

In that moment of bewilderment and terror the words of the runic ring flashed through his mind, and found expression in his gasping articulation:

"The fires of the Asas!"

Simultaneously with the illumination a fierce detonation like a powder-blast rent the air, and Godfrey, flung backwards as by a giant hand, tumbled senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER VII

“ WITHIN THE LOFTY TOMB ”

GODFREY opened his eyes to find himself lying on the grassy slope of Ormfell, staring up at the night-sky, with Idris kneeling beside him. A cool sensation was playing around his neck, and, gradually waking up to the reality of outward things, the surgeon discovered that his vest and collar lay open to the breeze, and that Idris was sprinkling his face with cold water-drops obtained from a pool close by.

“ Coming-to a little, I see,” Idris observed cheerfully. “ How do you feel ? ”

“ Awfully queer and dizzy,” replied Godfrey.

He lifted himself to a sitting posture, utterly unable to account for his present dazed condition.

“ You’ll be all right in a few minutes. Take a pull at this spirit-flask : that’ll revive you. I owe my life to you, old fellow.”

“ In what way ? ” asked Godfrey, his mind still too confused to recall the recent accident.

“ Gaseous vapour would have claimed its victim. Your grandfather was quite right in asserting this to be a carboniferous soil. Some of the coal-gas has issued to the surface. The atmosphere within the hillock was a mixture of carbon dioxide and floating fire-damp. Foolishly creeping about, with mouth held to the ground, I took in such a whiff of the one as to be quite overpowered by it before I had time to rise, while the other exploded as soon as you struck the match.”

The Viking's Skull

Godfrey, now quite alive to the past, gave an ejaculation of annoyance.

"I'm a pretty doctor not to have warned you against noxious vapours! It's a marvel we are both alive. But why was I not overpowered?"

"Probably because you were not holding your face to the earth where the gas collects, though very likely you, too, would have succumbed in a few moments. However, all's well that ends well. Your striking a light was a fortunate thing, for it appears to have acted like an electric discharge in instantly clearing the air. True, you were stunned, but I recovered; whether instantly by the explosion, or more slowly by the purifying atmosphere, I cannot tell. All I know is I awoke, and realizing what had happened, and feeling you beside me, I lost no time in dragging you out into the open air. And here we are, none the worse for our experience, I trust. No doubt it was occurrences like this that caused the old Norsemen to believe that Odin guarded the tombs of the dead by darting forth flames."

"The fires of the Asas are real enough, after all," muttered Godfrey, still feeling like one in a dream. "Hasn't the sound of the explosion brought any one here?"

"It seems not," said Idris, looking round. "So far we are safe. Old Orm offers a stubborn resistance," he continued. "'He being dead, yet fighteth.' But he is doomed to be defeated, for I will not go until I have examined the interior of the hillock."

"You are not thinking of venturing into that death-trap again?" said Godfrey, aghast.

"There is no danger now: at least, not from gases. The explosion dissolved them, and the outer air has had time to penetrate within. Besides, forewarned is forearmed. We know our peril: if one of us should be overpowered, the other must drag him out."

“Within the Lofty Tomb”

“How can you make an investigation without a light?”

“We shall have light enough. Fortunately, you snapped the lid of the box tightly before striking your match—an action that effectually screened the remaining two from the flame of the fire-damp.”

“Two matches will not help us much.”

“There you’re wrong. We will take some of this brushwood inside and light a bonfire: and the sooner we make a beginning the better. It’s two o’clock now. In another hour or so day will be dawning.”

Inwardly groaning at the perversity of his friend, Godfrey lent a hand in collecting the materials necessary for the fire: and, not without some trepidation, carried them through the dark passage into the mortuary chamber, the atmosphere of which, as his nostrils assured him, had become considerably clarified since his previous visit.

Fearing that the two matches when kindled might expire before he could fire the twigs, which were damp with the afternoon’s rain, Idris drew forth a small book, a pocket edition of *Hamlet*, and proceeded to detach leaf after leaf, twisting them into spirals. These he handed to Godfrey, enjoining him to keep a flame alive by kindling one from another till the twigs should have fairly caught.

“Now to strike the fateful match!” he said. “Pray heaven the Asas do not give us another pyrotechnic display!”

He cautiously struck the match. Godfrey instantly kindled one of his paper-spirals from the flame.

“No fireworks this time, you see,” remarked Idris, as all remained quiet. “This is what may be called *making light* of Shakespeare,” he added, as, taking the kindled papers one after another from Godfrey’s hand, he applied them to the leaves and twigs, endeavouring to force them into a blaze.

The Viking's Skull

The pale, bluish glare that sprang up made the chamber faintly visible. Idris, intent on his task of ignition saw nothing but the brushwood before him, but Godfrey could not refrain from casting a timid glance around, even at the risk of extinguishing the lighted paper in his hand.

There was, however, nothing very dreadful in the scene before him. He found himself standing in a chamber about twenty feet square, the sides of which were composed of rough-hewn blocks of masonry, glistening with moisture, and dotted with patches of fungous growth. The roof was formed by a layer of tree-trunks, necessarily of great size and strength in order to support the vast weight above. The floor seemed to be of earth, its surface glimmering here and there with tiny black pools, formed by the constant dropping of moisture from the roof.

But the treasures deposited of old by Hilda the Alruna for her son, Magnus of Deira — where were they? Well for Idris that he had not set his heart on finding them, for the chamber was bare, save for one object in the centre. This was the sarcophagus-like structure against which Godfrey had collided when looking for Idris' body. By the flickering light he could see that this receptacle was of oblong shape, the sides consisting of four upright stone slabs let into the earth, with a fifth one resting upon them like a lid.

Idris had now succeeded in his task, and the twigs and branches blazing up cast over the chamber a ruddy glow sufficiently bright for the taking of observations.

“This is better than a lantern. I warrant the place hasn't looked so cheerful for centuries,” remarked Idris, as he stood by the blaze and took a survey of the chamber.

“Cheerful at present, perhaps, but in ten minutes we shall be smoked out.”



VTC

CYRUS CUNEO

“Within the Lofty Tomb”

“I think not. This fire will burn bright and clear presently, and will give out little smoke.”

Taking up a lighted brand from the fire Idris moved forward and began his investigations with the tomb by making a scrutiny of its lid.

“No inscription here, runic or otherwise. — Humph! shall we supply one, HIC JACET ORMUS. — Now to remove this slab! Let us see if there are bones beneath.”

Too eager to wait for Godfrey’s assistance he seized the lid with one hand, and, exerting all his strength, swung it off laterally.

A cry of surprise, rather than of alarm, broke from him, as he caught sight of a full-sized human skeleton lying within. A burning fragment from the torch he carried dropped within the teeth of the skeleton, where, still continuing to glow, it lit up the skull with weird effect, the red flicker giving an apparent motion to the grinning jaws and eyeless sockets.

“Are these the remains of your Viking?” asked Godfrey.

“Can there be doubt about it? This is old Orm, or what is left of him,” replied Idris, holding the torch low over the skeleton. — “Here reposes one who, I doubt not, made a brave figure in his day. And now? ‘None so poor to do him reverence.’ The people of Ormsby do not know even his name, and yet he was the founder of their town, its nomenclator, in fact. The old Greeks would have raised a statue and an altar to him in their market-place, and have worshipped him as their hero eponymous. And here he lies neglected and forgotten!

‘Shade of the mighty! can it be
That this is all remains of thee?’

“Is this wasted bone the ‘high arm’ spoken of on the runic ring? Where be now its feats of strength? And

The Viking's Skull

where is the wealth won by his ashen spear? the riches that conferred upon him the epithet of Golden? the treasure placed within the 'lofty tomb' by his wife, Hilda, the Norse prophetess? Vanished! Whither? Removed by whom? and when? Did Magnus of Deira really receive the runic ring despatched to him by his mother? Did he come here in ancient days to remove his heritage, or has the treasure been taken by other, perhaps modern, hands? If so, by whose? By the masked man of Quilaix's? By Captain Rochefort's or by my father's? Have they left behind any trace of their visit?"

His eyes roving around the chamber were attracted by a fabric lying at the foot of one of the walls.

"What have we here?" he said, stepping forward and picking it up. "A piece of cloth! Will this give us a clue to the men who were here last?"

For better inspection he carried the cloth to the light of the fire. When unrolled the fabric proved to be oblong in shape, six feet by four, its edges very much frayed, and its surface so defaced by clay that it was impossible at first to discover its texture, colour, or use.

"I see what it is," he remarked at last. "Look at that triangular shred of cloth hanging from the metallic rod: its shape tallies with the triangular rent in this fabric. This has been torn from that rail: it is a part of the tapestry that once decked the walls of this chamber. I am disappointed again; I thought to find a modern vesture, and am put off with ancient tapestry."

He began to scrape the fabric with his penknife.

"I can detect some coloured threads," he went on. "It is figured arras: but it is impossible at present to make out what the figures are. Here are some letters, too. I can detect N. and T. We must keep this. When cleaned it may prove to be an interesting 'find'—

“Within the Lofty Tomb”

of a more ancient date, unless my chronology be at fault, than the famous Bayeux Tapestry. What puzzles me is, why the man who carried off the rest of the tapestry should leave this behind him.”

“Probably because it is a torn remnant.”

“But it would be a very simple matter to sew it to the main piece again. Do you notice how the rail is bent where the three cornered bit is?”

Godfrey looked and saw that the rod was bent downwards.

“What inference do you draw from that?” Idris asked.

“That somebody must have been tugging heavily at the tapestry to cause such a curvature.”

“Exactly. But why should any one wrench so violently at the tapestry, tapestry that was evidently regarded as valuable, otherwise it would not have been carried off?”

Godfrey shrugged his shoulders at the apparent irrelevancy of Idris’ remarks.

“Your question is not susceptible of an answer.”

“True — at present. But an investigator should take note of every circumstance, however trifling, although at the time he may fail to discern its true significance.”

“But seeing that the tapestry may have been carried off centuries ago, it is difficult to discover the present application of your remark.”

“On the other hand it may have been carried off only recently: it is these recent traces that I wish to find. Somehow, this bent rod attracts me. Ah!”

Whilst speaking thus he suddenly recalled an incident that had occurred during his previous exploration in the dark.

“Godfrey, your divining rod. I am half-a-believer in its powers. At any rate I am going to try an experiment.”

The Viking's Skull

Taking the hazel stick he walked to that part of the wall where the shred of tapestry hung.

"Either I am dreaming," he said, "or a singular experience befell me at this spot."

Standing in the same position as before he extended the stick horizontally, explaining to Godfrey the reason for his act.

But Solomon's saying, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be," was not verified on the present occasion. Though Idris waited patiently for several minutes the rod manifested none of the downward tendency that it had previously shown.

Godfrey himself took the stick and tried the experiment, but with no better result. He expressed his opinion that Idris must have been the victim of an illusion: but to this Idris would not assent.

"The rod does not turn now, that's clear. But that it *did* turn I am confident. It was no fancy of mine."

"Let us dig," said Godfrey, "and see whether there is anything beneath the soil that could have caused it."

With these words he took up the spade and began digging. Idris followed his example, wielding the pickaxe, but found, after a few strokes, that some hard substance prevented the point of the implement from penetrating to a greater depth than three or four inches.

"This earth is mere superficial deposit, percolations from the roof," said Idris. "There is a stone flooring beneath."

In a few moments they had cleared away the terrene deposit, discovering nothing however, except a block of smooth masonry, at which Idris dealt a few strokes by way of experiment.

"Humph! seems solid enough. The dull sound given forth is hardly suggestive of a cavity. What made the rod curve, I wonder?"

“Within the Lofty Tomb”

Finding no answer to this question, he turned reluctantly away, and began to explore other parts of the chamber. He made a careful examination of its flooring, allowing no part of it to escape him. With the spade he swept aside the black water from the tiny hollows, and with the pickaxe he probed the ground at various points, discovering everywhere stone pavement beneath the superficial covering of earth.

The object that he was hoping to find — a match-box, or a button bearing the maker's name; the dated sheet of a newspaper; a scrap of handwriting: a handkerchief, marked with the owner's initials: or some article of like character — existed only in his fancy. A thorough search on the part of the two friends failed to bring anything to light, either on the surface of the floor, or embedded within the clay.

There was nothing to indicate the date at which the tumulus had been last entered: whether ten, twenty, or a hundred years before. For all they could tell to the contrary, many centuries might have passed since its interior had been trodden by human footsteps.

Relinquishing at last his fruitless labours Idris seated himself on the edge of the Viking's tomb with disappointment written on his features.

“I have so long clung to the hope that this place would afford a clue to the finding of my father, that I cannot give up the notion even now, when its futility seems most apparent. You may think me fanciful, Godfrey, but something seems to whisper that there *are* traces of him here, if I did but know where to look for them. And yet, I suppose, we have done all that it is possible to do?”

He rose again from his seat and scrutinized the four walls of the chamber, sounding them with the pickaxe.

The Viking's Skull

"There does not appear to be any cell or passage behind these," he muttered.

He turned his eyes upwards, and took a survey of the black tree-trunks forming the roof of the chamber: and finished his investigations by probing the dust of the Viking's tomb with the end of the walking-stick, but made no further discovery.

"So end my hopes of finding my father," he muttered sadly. "My labour has been expended on a vain quest. Years of search throughout Europe: years of study over runic letters, end in — a dead man's bones! — How this old fellow grins! One would think he enjoys my discomfiture. I shall take his skull back with me."

"Why, in heaven's name?"

"A whim of mine, nothing more. I have taken a fancy for the skull, and the skull I will have. So old Orm," he continued, stooping down and detaching the grisly head-piece from the vertebral column, "prepare to face the light of day after a sleep of centuries in darkness."

"Put it back again," said Godfrey. "What good can it do you? You can't possibly put it to any use."

"The skull of a brave Viking is a trophy well worth preserving, a noble ornament for my sideboard. And if you talk of use, there are several uses to which I can put it. I may set it with silver, and convert it into a drinking-cup, like that used by Byron. Or I may turn it into a pretty lamp to write tragedy by, after the fashion of the poet Young. Or, imitating the old Egyptians, I may use it as a table-decoration to remind me of death, and of the vanity of all things human. The skull will be a souvenir of our expedition, a memento of an experience unique, at least, in my life. — So hurrah!" he cried, holding the trophy aloft, "HURRAH FOR THE VIKING'S SKULL!"

* * * * *

“Within the Lofty Tomb”

Day was dawning when Idris and Godfrey reached home, after concealing, so far as lay in their power, the traces of their night's work. Beatrice, who had been sitting up anxiously awaiting their return, gave a little scream when she beheld their blackened faces.

“Heavens! what has happened?” she cried.

Over the repast that she had kept in readiness for them Idris gave an account of the expedition, finishing his story by producing the relics he had brought away with him, namely, the Viking's skull and the fragment of tapestry.

“Let us have some warm water, Trixie,” said Godfrey. “We will try to clean this tapestry.”

A bowl of warm water was soon procured, Godfrey diluting it with a powder brought by him from his surgery.

“A chemical preparation of my own,” he explained, “warranted to take out stains without injuring the cloth.”

Under Beatrice's manipulation the relic gradually disclosed itself as a piece of brownish-coloured linen, divided by a vertical line of black thread into two sections of unequal length. Each section consisted of a picture woven in woollen threads on the linen background, and each was fragmentary in character, the beginning of the one and the end of the other being torn away.

The left section represented a battle-field: spears were hurtling in air: two warriors were lying prostrate, and a third, a yellow-haired hero, his bare arms flung aloft, was in the act of falling backwards, his breast pierced by an arrow. These figures, drawn to a scale of about half the human size, were in a good state of preservation. The colours of the garments had scarcely faded: the golden filaments composing the shields still retained their brightness: and the swords, woven from silver threads, glinted in the rising sunlight, as Beatrice moved the fabric to and

The Viking's Skull

fro. To this section was attached the subscription :—
“ HIC ORMUM AUREUM OCCIDUNT.”

“ What do these words mean ? ” Beatrice asked.

“ ‘ Here they kill Orm the Golden, ’ ” Idris replied.

“ Orm the Golden, ” Godfrey repeated. “ You are right, then, Idris, in your theory as to that tumulus being the tomb of the warrior spoken of on the runic ring. I confess that till this moment I have had my doubts on the point, but this piece of tapestry is decisive.”

In the other section of the cloth the same warrior, still pierced by the arrow, was represented as lying prone upon the earth : two figures, those of a woman and of a boy, were bending over him. That it was night-time was shown by the torches they carried. The woman had evidently come to bear off the body of the dead chief. The words, “ HILDA INVENIT ” — were clearly discernible ; the rest of the inscription was wanting.

“ ‘ Hilda finds ’ — Orm, I suppose the next word would be, if we had the inscription in full, ” said Idris. “ Hilda — the lady of the runic ring, you will remember. This other figure is perhaps intended for her son Magnus : if so, it is clear that he was a lad at the time of his father's death, which may account for his mother's act in hiding the treasure in Ormfell. There it was to remain till her son should be of age to defend his heritage. The roll of tapestry suspended round the tomb was evidently, when entire, a complete record in needlework of the life of Orm the Viking. It must have formed an interesting relic of Norse times. A pity we haven't the whole of it.”

“ And so this is Hilda the Alruna ! ” mused Beatrice, contemplating the figure on the tapestry. “ How curiously we are linked with the past ! To think that the expedition in which you nearly lost your lives is the result of a sentence engraved on a Norse altar-ring a thousand years ago by the lady portrayed on this piece of

“Within the Lofty Tomb”

needlework! She had dark hair, if this be her ‘counterfeit presentment.’ And to think, too, that we possess the very skull of the yellow-haired Viking pictured here! It sounds too romantic to be true. Where are you going to put your grisly trophy, Mr. Breakspear?”

“The head of the staircase is the orthodox place.”

“The orthodox place?” repeated Beatrice, puzzled by the expression.

“Some ancient houses keep a skull as part of the furnishings,” Idris explained. “It is supposed to bring good luck, and the head of the staircase is its usual place, any removal of it being fraught with danger to the house. Of course this is foolery, but ——”

“But still we may as well be in the fashion,” smiled Beatrice, “and so I’ll put it where you say.”

The Viking’s skull was therefore taken by her to the embrasure of the window that looked down the staircase, after which act Beatrice went off for a brief spell of sleep, this being the first time she had ever gone to bed at sun-rising.

Godfrey, preparing to follow her example, lingered for a moment, attracted by the appearance of the water in which the tapestry had been cleansed.

“How red this water is!” he murmured. “To what is the colour due?”

“Probably to the reddish coloured clay with which the cloth was stained,” replied Idris.

“It may be so,” said the physician, slowly and thoughtfully, “but if I remember rightly, the clay in that part of the chamber where the tapestry lay was not red at all. The appearance of this water is certainly curious. One might almost take it for blood!”

CHAPTER VIII

LORELIE RIVIÈRE

THE expedition to Ormfell had been a failure from Idris' point of view. Deaf to the voice of reason he had clung to the idea that the Viking's tomb held a clue that would aid him in finding his father. Having now received clear proof of the fallacy of that hope Idris, after a few hours' sleep, wandered forth by the seashore to consider what his next step should be.

It was an afternoon of brilliant sunshine. The tide was out, but without making any inquiries as to the time of its return, he strolled leisurely onward, wrapped in meditation.

Casually raising his eyes from the ribbed sea-sand he caught sight of a structure, locally known as "The Stairs of David." This was an arrangement of three ladders, suspended one above another on the face of the cliff, which at this point rose vertically to a height of more than a hundred feet. Iron hooks kept these ladders in position. The structure, a very frail one, had been put up originally to enable crab-fishers to reach this part of the beach with more expedition.

Still deep in thought Idris passed on, and had left the ladder about a mile in his rear, when he suddenly paused and looked in the direction of the murmuring sound—the sound he had heard for some time, but to which he had given no heed.

The tide was coming in, and coming in so quickly, that unless he hastened back at once he ran the risk of being

Lorelie Rivière

drowned : for steep cliffs rose above him, and the open beach was at least five miles away.

Just on the point of setting off at a run he was checked by the recollection of "The Stairs of David." It would be easy to scale the cliff by means of this structure.

He moved onward at a leisurely pace, and then stopped abruptly. What was that object rising and falling on the surface of the water a few yards in rear of the advancing line of foam? Let "The Stairs of David" be far off or close by, he must satisfy his curiosity before mounting them.

He ran to the edge of the breakers, and, with a thrill of surprise, discovered that the undulating object was a woman's hat.

How came it there? He had not, so far as he could remember, encountered anybody in his walk along the shore. He looked over the dancing waves, but neither boat nor vessel was visible : he looked up and down the beach : he looked along the craggy summit of the cliffs that rose in frowning grandeur above him, but could see neither man nor woman. He stood, a solitary figure, on a shore that stretched away north and south for many miles.

Regardless of the advancing tide he remained motionless, fascinated by the sight of the hat, his uneasiness deepening each moment. There was something familiar in the grey felt with its once graceful feather bedrenched with the salt spray.

He advanced into the shallow water and lifted the hat for a closer survey. It was rarely that Idris took note of a woman's attire, but he could recall every detail of the dress worn by Mademoiselle Rivière on the day he saw her in the Ravengar Chantry, and he knew that this hat was hers.

His heart, weighted by a terrible idea, sank within him

The Viking's Skull

like lead. Half expecting to see a dead form come floating past he glanced again over the surface of the rippling tide.

He now recollected, what he had hitherto forgotten, that there were dangerous quicksands along this part of the coast. Must he believe that Mademoiselle Rivière had become engulfed, and that the tide was now foaming jubilantly over her head?

Once more he looked along the shore, and, as he looked, his pulses thrilled with a sudden and delicious relief; for at the sandy base of a distant cliff he caught sight of a figure lying prone.

Dropping the hat he hurried over the intervening space, and in a moment more was kneeling beside the form of Lorelie Rivière. Beneath her lay the third and lowest of the three ladders that formed the so-called "Stairs of David." She had been either ascending or descending the frail structure, and it had given way. The ladder, worm-eaten with age, had snapped into three portions on touching the sands, and the shock of its fall had deprived her of consciousness.

Her eyelids were closed. Silent and motionless she lay, her breathing so faint as scarce to seem breathing at all, her delicate fingers still clinging to a rung of the fallen ladder.

"Thank heaven, she is alive!" murmured Idris, a great dread rolling from his heart.

He gently detached her fingers from the rung of the ladder, and, tenderly raising her, rested her head upon his knee, turning her face towards the breeze. As he did so, the murmuring sound, that had never once ceased, seemed to swell louder, and his heart almost leaped into his mouth when he noticed how rapidly the tide was advancing.

That terrible tide!

Lorelie Rivière

Were it not for the rush of waters swirling forward he might have thought that some good fairy was favouring his heart's dearest wish. The loveliest maiden whom he had ever seen was resting within his arms, dependent upon him for safety. But what safety could he give? Their position seemed hopeless. The last rung of the middle ladder hung forty feet or more above his head. The lowest ladder lay on the sands in three portions, and he realized at a glance the impossibility of refixing them in their original position.

"No boat in sight! Impossible to scale the cliffs! Too far to swim with her to Ormsby! What is to be our fate?" he muttered.

Idris had often looked death in the face, but never in circumstances so hard as these. Was he to die holding this fair maiden in his arms, helplessly witnessing her death-gasps? And the voice of the sea, swelling ever higher and higher, seemed to give an answering cry of "Yes, yes!"

The breeze blowing full upon her face had a reviving effect upon her. Slowly she opened her eyes, and a look of innocent wonder came over her face when she met Idris' earnest gaze bent upon her.

"You fell from the ladder, you remember," he said, answering the question in her eyes. "Are you hurt? Have you broken any bones?"

"I—I think not," was the reply.

"Shall I help you to stand?"

She assented. But no sooner was she raised to her feet than throbs of pain began to shoot through her left ankle, and she leaned for support against the cliff, resting her right foot only upon the sand.

"My ankle pains me. I don't think I can walk."

While thus speaking she chanced to look upward at the ladder hanging far above her head, and then, lower-

The Viking's Skull

ing her eyes to the flowing sea, she suddenly took in the full peril of their position.

"The tide! the tide!" she murmured, clasping her hands. "We are lost."

"We certainly mustn't remain here. And if you cannot walk I must carry you."

Idris' cheerful and brisk air did not deceive her. Glancing from left to right she saw the futility of his proposal as well as he saw it himself.

The contour of the shore formed a semicircular bay many miles in length, and its sands were lined by a wall of lofty perpendicular cliffs without a single gap to break their continuity. Idris and his companion were standing somewhere near the centre of this curve. The tide, extending in a straight line across the bay, had now closed in upon the extreme points of the arc-like sweep, and was still advancing, covering the sand and reducing at each moment the extent of their standing room. Before Idris could have carried her half-a-mile the sea would be breaking many feet deep upon the base of the cliffs.

"You cannot save me," said Mademoiselle Rivière, a sudden calmness coming over her. "It is impossible. You must leave me and try to save yourself."

The gentle maiden, whom a harsh word melts to tears, will often face death with fortitude, the great crisis evoking all the latent heroism of her nature. So it was now, and Idris, looking into the depth of Mademoiselle Rivière's steadfast eyes, caught a glimpse of how those Christian women may have looked who faced martyrdom in the pagan days of old. Strange that a maiden, seemingly so good and brave, should have excited the aversion of Beatrice!

"If you die, I die with you," said Idris. "But I have no intention of letting either you or myself die. There is a way of escape open to us."

Lorelie Rivière

For, with a sudden thrill of joy, he remembered that, at a point a few hundred yards to the north of their present position, he had passed a great pile of rocks, fallen crags detached from the sides of the overhanging precipice. The spot was invisible from where he now stood, being hidden behind a projecting buttress of the cliff, but he judged that the summit of this rocky mass was certainly above high-water mark. There he and Mademoiselle Rivière must remain till the ebb of the tide, unless they should be so fortunate as to attract the notice of some passing boat.

Making known his intention, Idris added, "Pardon me; this is no time for ceremony."

He lifted her in his arms, and she, with a sudden and natural revulsion in favour of life, submitted to his will, placing her arms around his neck to steady her person.

The humming sea, as if bent on securing its victims, came foaming with threatening rapidity over the bare stretch of sand, throwing forward long streamlets, that, like eager creatures in a race, seemed striving with each other to be first at the foot of the cliff.

Though Lorelie Rivière was but a light weight Idris' progress was necessarily slow. At each step his foot sank deeper into the rapidly-moistening sand, and ere long the water itself was swirling round his ankles, and flinging its sparkling spray against the base of the precipice. And yet in all his life he had never experienced the pure joy that filled him at that moment. The woman whom he most loved was reclining within his arms, and clasped so closely to him, that he could feel her breast swelling against his own, and her hair touching his cheek. There was a subtle charm in the situation: what wonder, then, that he desired to prolong it, and that he moved at a slower pace as he drew near the pile of fallen crags?

The desired haven was gained at last, and Mademoiselle

The Viking's Skull

Rivière, partly by her own efforts and partly with the help of Idris, clambered up the face of the slippery and weed-grown rocks, the top of which formed an irregular, hummocky platform, a few yards in extent.

"Saved!" she murmured, sinking down and scarcely able to repress a tendency to cry. "But will not the tide cover this ledge?"

"No. See here!" replied Idris, plucking a weed beside her. "Samphire! It never grows below salt water. We are quite safe."

Mademoiselle Rivière clasped her hands: her lips moved, and Idris knew that she was breathing a silent prayer.

"You have saved my life," she said, looking up at him with gratitude shining from her eyes. "How can I thank you?"

Though he had seen Mademoiselle Rivière but once, and then for a moment only: though this was his first time of conversing with her, Idris intuitively felt that she was the one woman in the world for him: and that though happiness might be possible apart from her, such happiness would be but the shadow of that derivable from her undivided love.

Fortune was certainly favouring him. He would have given half his wealth to any one who could have brought about such a situation as the present, and lo! the event had happened naturally, of itself, and without any premeditation on his part. It was wonderful! Many hours might pass ere he and Mademoiselle Rivière could quit the spot where they now were. He determined to make good use of this golden opportunity. He would exert all his powers to gain a place, if not in her affection, at least in her friendship, so that her feeling on parting from him should contain something of regret.

"How can I thank you?" she repeated.

Lorelie Rivière

“By not thanking me. How did the accident happen?”

“My hat was the cause of it all. I was standing on the edge of the cliff when the wind carried it off to the sands below. Not wishing to return home bare-headed, I clambered down ‘The Stairs of David’ after it. The ladder gave way, and I fell. A sudden stop, and I remember no more.”

“It was well the ground at the foot of the cliff was soft sand,” said Idris.

“It was well, as you say,” replied Mademoiselle Rivière with a shiver. “I shall never forget the sensation of falling through the air.”

“Does your ankle still pain you?” Idris asked, observing that she shrank from placing her left foot on the ground.

“A little,” she smiled.

“You are sure it is not dislocated — broken?”

“O no; it is merely a sprain. How long shall we have to remain here?” she added.

This was a question that Idris himself had been considering. It appeared that Mademoiselle Rivière, on setting out for her walk, had not told any one of the direction she had intended to take: Idris had been similarly negligent. Hence it was very unlikely that men from Ormsby would come cruising along the shore in boats to search for them. To scale the precipice was out of the question. To shout for aid would be of little avail, for as the cliff above them was lofty, and the highroad ran a considerable distance from its edge, there was little probability that their voices would be heard. Their position rendered it impossible to make any signals that would be visible at Ormsby, that town being situated just behind the cliff that formed one extremity of the bay.

“I fear,” said Idris, after considering all these things,

The Viking's Skull

“that our captivity is dependent upon the good graces of the tide.”

“And the tide will be several hours in turning,” said Mademoiselle Rivière. “Well, I suppose I must play the philosopher, and accept the situation. It is certainly better to be here than under the waves.”

If her beauty charmed Idris, her manner, pleasant and without affectation, charmed him still more.

So interested had he been in her companionship that he had hitherto failed to notice that the face of the overhanging cliff was pierced by a deep cavern, the mouth of which was on a level with the top of their rocky platform.

“What is this?” he said, stepping forward to take a closer view. “A cave, as I live. A coast-guard's place for watching smugglers, I suppose.”

“That must be the ‘Hermit's Cave,’” said Mademoiselle Rivière, turning her eyes upon it, “so named from an ancient recluse who is said to have made it his home. I am told that the chair in which he sat is still to be seen, cut out of the solid rock.”

“Excellent! You must occupy that seat, mademoiselle. It will be more pleasant there than sitting out here upon this slippery windy rock.”

She rose, glad of the proposed change, for the wind was playing confusion with her hair. Observing her wince, as her left foot touched the ground, Idris said, with a smile:—

“You had better let me carry you.”

Lorelie coloured, neither assenting nor opposing. Since Idris had carried her once it would be prudery to resist now, and so, knowing that she must either accept his aid or else crawl to the spot upon her hands and knees, she entrusted herself to his arms, and in this way gained the entrance of the cave, which was of consider-

Lorelie Rivière

able extent, and strewn with logs, planks, and odd pieces of timber.

“Where does all this wood come from?” she asked.

“Wreckage-timber, probably; doubtless placed here by the coast-guard to be used as firing in cold weather. See! here is the hermit’s seat you spoke of,” said Idris, indicating a piece of rock jutting from the wall of the cave near its entrance. It had been hollowed out by art into the rude resemblance of an armchair, and within this recess Idris placed his companion.

“I hope you dined well before setting out,” he said, “for our grotto offers nothing in the shape of commissariat.”

“I am somewhat thirsty,” replied Lorelie, as she turned her eyes upon a tiny spring of water, which, issuing from a fissure in the wall of the cave, flowed silently down into a depression hollowed out in the floor, just beside the hermit’s seat; then, overflowing from the basin into a groove of its own making, the water became lost in an orifice a few feet distant.

“Here is a remedy for thirst,” said Idris. “The daily drink of our hermit. ‘The waters of Siloah that go softly,’ was perhaps his name for it. The eremite’s crockeryware having perished, how do you propose to drink?”

“With Nature’s cup,” smiled Lorelie, curving her hands into the shape of a bowl.

Mindful of her ankle she slid cautiously upon her knees and bent, a charming picture, over the pool.

“How clear and still,” she murmured. “Its surface is like a mirror.”

“Then do not gaze too long upon it, lest you meet the fate of Narcissus.”

“Narcissus?” she repeated, looking up at him with inquiring eyes.

The Viking's Skull

“ He died from the reflection of his own loveliness.”

Idris regretted his words almost in the very moment of their utterance, for he could tell by the sudden clouding of her face that she was averse to the language of gallantry. Clearly she was not a woman to be won by empty compliment, and he resolved to steer clear of such a quicksand. He was glad to observe that when she had resumed her seat the pleasant smile was again on her lip.

Attentive to every variation in her countenance he began to discern two moods in Lorelie Rivière: the one vivacious and sprightly, and this seemed to be her original disposition: the other, pensive and sad, the result, so he judged, of some secret sorrow.

He longed to know more of this fair lady, slighted by Beatrice; the lady who had once lived at Nantes in the very house that fronted the scene of the murder of Duchesne, that murder for which his father had been condemned: the lady who was erecting in St. Oswald's Churchyard a marble cross inscribed with an epitaph that seemed almost applicable to his father's case: the lady whose playing upon the organ had wrought so weird an effect upon his mind.

All these things contributed to invest Lorelie Rivière with a charming air of mystery, but Idris recognized that the time was not yet ripe to press for confidences.

Dragging a few logs forward he disposed them so as to form a seat for himself near the entrance of the cavern, remarking as he did so:—

“ We must not forget to look out for passing boats.”

The afternoon sun was filling the air with a dusky golden glow. The waves dancing and sparkling below the mouth of the cave flashed emerald and sapphire hues upon its roof, irradiating the place with an ever-changing light.

To Idris the situation was a charming tableau, a living

Lorelie Rivière

idyll, and one that was rendered all the more pleasant by contrast with their recent perilous position. Mademoiselle Rivière trembled as she reflected on what might have happened but for the chance passing of this stranger. Strange that until this moment it had not occurred to her to ask his name!

“You know my name,” she said, “but I have yet to learn yours.”

“My name is Breakspear,” he replied, withholding his true patronymic; and feeling as he spoke a sense of shame of having to deceive her even in so small a matter; “Idris Breakspear.”

“*Idris!*” she said, with a sudden start, as if the name had touched some chord in her memory. “Idris! It is a somewhat uncommon name.”

“We will say, then, that its rarity is a point in its favour,” smiled Idris, who had observed her start, and wondered at the cause.

“Have we not met before, Mr. Breakspear?”

“I saw you two days ago in the Ravengar Chantry,” he replied. He did not say, as he might truthfully have said, that during these two days he had been thinking of little else but that brief meeting. “Miss Ravengar and I,” he continued, “had been listening to your recital on the organ. I must congratulate you on your skill as a musician, Mademoiselle Rivière. May I ask the name of the last chant you played? Was it taken from some oratorio, or was it your own improvisation?”

“The last chant?” repeated Lorelie, with a pensive air. “Let me think? What was it? Did it run like this?”

And in a sweet silvery tone she trilled off a bar which Idris immediately recognized as a part of the refrain that had been played by her.

“That is the ‘Ravengar Funeral March,’” explained Lorelie. “Its origin goes far back into the depths of the

The Viking's Skull

dark ages, tradition affirming that it is the composition of an ancient scald, and was first chanted at the burial of the old Norse chieftain who founded the Ravengar family. It has been the custom to play it at the funeral of every Ravengar, though he would be a bold person who should say that the tune has not undergone variations in its descent to our times. The unknown minstrel with whom it originated was a genius, a mediæval Mozart. Could you not fancy that you heard the tread of numerous feet in procession, the clang of shield and spear, the groans of warriors, the plaintive weeping of women?"

"It certainly *was* a weird requiem; it moved me as no other piece of music ever has."

And then, absorbed in a new idea, Idris forgot for the moment the presence of even Lorelie Rivière.

"What are these Ravengars to me," he thought, "or am I to them, that their Funeral Chant should produce in me such clairvoyant sensations?"

This question was succeeded by another. How had Mademoiselle Rivière become familiar with this requiem? As if in answer to his thoughts Lorelie remarked:—

"I heard Viscount Walden play it once in Venice: he gave it as a specimen of the weird and uncanny in music. It so took my fancy that I did not rest till I had obtained a copy of it."

It was somewhat disquieting to learn that she had met Lord Walden abroad, and that she was on terms of sufficient friendship to beg from him a copy of music. Had this friendship changed into something deeper? Was he to regard Lord Walden in the light of a rival? Had Mademoiselle Rivière come to Ormsby in order to be near the viscount? In saving her from being overwhelmed by the tide Idris had doubtless gained a high place in her favour, but then gratitude is not love, and Ravenhall and a coronet were powerful attractions.

Lorelie Rivière

“Do you often play at St. Oswald’s Church?” he asked, after an interval of silence.

“Yes. I find a charm in its ‘dim religious light.’”

“And the quietude of the place,” said Idris, “is also favourable to the study of mediæval historians — *Paulus Diaconus*, for example.”

“Ah! Mr. Breakspear,” she said, “so it was *you* who carried off my book from the organ-loft. I guessed as much when I went back, and found it gone. You must not forget to return it, for I value it highly. Now, confess, that you have wondered why I, a woman, should take to poring over that old Lombard historian?”

“Curiosity is not confined to the sex with whom it is supposed to have originated,” smiled Idris, “and I am willing to admit, mademoiselle, that I *have* been puzzled. The book does not belong to the style of literature usually patronized by ladies.”

“*Merci!* I regard that last remark as a compliment. Well, I will explain the mystery, if you will promise to keep the matter a secret.” And upon Idris giving his assurance, she continued: “I am trying to write a poetical play, a tragedy relating to the times of the Italo-Lombard kings, and as I do not wish to commit anachronisms, it behoves me to study the historical authorities in the original.”

“I understand,” answered Idris, his opinion of Lorelie rising higher than ever: besides being a musician and a Latin scholar, she was also a poetess! “And what are you going to call your play?”

“‘The Fatal Skull,’” she replied. “You look surprised, Mr. Breakspear. Is there already a play of that name?”

“I have never heard of it.”

“Because one must not borrow another author’s title, is it not so?”

The Viking's Skull

"*The Fatal Skull!*" Idris could not but think it a curious coincidence that Lorelie's drama should bear such a title, when he himself at this time was much interested in a skull, to wit, that of Orm the Viking.

"Why so weird a title, mademoiselle?"

"Because it is appropriate to the leading incident in the piece: for the play turns on the famous historic banquet at which the Lombard Queen Rosamond was forced by her husband to drink from her father's skull. So now you understand, Mr. Breakspear," she went on, "that wherever the words 'Fatal Skull,' or the initials 'F. S.,' occur in the margin of my book, they mean that there is something in the passage thus marked capable of being worked into my drama."

"And when do you intend to publish it?"

"Not yet: perhaps never. I write, not for fame, but for my own pleasure."

"Do not say that, mademoiselle. If one has noble thoughts the world will be the better for hearing them. I hope, therefore, to see the day when your work will be published: nay, more, I hope to see it acted."

"It is kind of you to say so," she murmured. The light of pleasure in her eyes, and the colour mantling her cheek, so enhanced her beauty that it was with difficulty the impulsive Idris could repress the temptation of telling her of his love. But, even as he watched, the look of pleasure faded from her face, and there succeeded the melancholy air that he had previously noticed, an air that said almost as plainly as words, "I am forgetting myself: it is not for me to be glad."

Yet the smile returned to her lip when Idris ventured upon a suggestion.

"I see neither boat nor vessel within hail," he remarked, glancing over the sea. "We have several hours yet before us. Now in the Christmas tales, you know, when

Lorelie Rivière

the stage-coach passengers are snowed up at the country-inn, or the sea-voyagers wrecked on the lonely isle, they always beguile the time by story-telling. It's the orthodox thing to do. Suppose we imitate them."

"A good idea! and," added Lorelie archly, "it becomes the mover of the proposition to take the initiative."

"Caught in the net I was preparing for another!" smiled Idris. "I was hoping to hear you recite some portions of your play. But that will come later. Well, mademoiselle, what shall my story be?"

"You said a while ago that you have led a somewhat adventurous life, and that you once took part in a battle. I call for some of your adventures."

"You flatter my vanity. A man's self is an insidious theme. The *Apologia pro meâ vitâ* is rarely to be trusted, the author being naturally prone to magnify his virtues, and minimize his faults. Always receive the autobiography *cum grano salis*."

"Very well," replied Lorelie, with a smile irresistible in its witchery. "Begin your story, and I will supply the *granum salis* as you proceed."

Vain was it for Idris to protest. She was not to be deterred from her purpose of hearing something of his personal history; and, accordingly, after due reflection, he proceeded to relate some of his experiences in the Græco-Turkish War of '97, in which he had taken a part, in common with some other Englishmen of adventurous spirit.

Idris was master of a certain natural eloquence, an eloquence very effective in the case of an imaginative maiden. At any rate Lorelie seemed to take a deep interest in his words. Never before had he seen so attentive a listener. Her face, like water lit by the changing rays of the sun, reflected all the varying expressions on his own counte-

The Viking's Skull

nance, as he passed from grave to gay, from scene to scene.

A significant incident occurred during the telling of these reminiscences.

He was relating that on one occasion he had been entrusted by a Greek commander with the task of conveying a secret dispatch to a village beyond the enemy's lines. The ordinary route to this place ran through a mountain-pass, which at that time was carefully guarded by Bashi-Bazouks. Idris, therefore, determined to scale the face of an almost perpendicular cliff, and passing, as it were, above the heads of the watchers, come out in their rear. When he was three-fourths of the way up the cliff his heart almost leaped into his mouth as he caught a glimpse of a Bashi-Bazouk, dagger in hand, waiting for him at the top. The shades of twilight were falling: to descend was impossible: to go upward was to meet certain death: yet upward he continued to pull himself, little by little, hoping that by some good fortune he might be able to outwit the armed watcher. In graphic language he painted his sensations as none could, save those only who have been in a position.

At this point Lorelie's interest became intense, even painful. So vivid was her realization of the scene that she seemed at that very moment to see Idris before her, clinging feebly to the edge of the cliff in the dusky gloom, with the savage enemy above him dealing the death-stroke. She leaned forward in her seat with parted lips: then, quite unconsciously, and all-forgetful of her sprained ankle, she half rose with her arm extended as if to ward off the coming blow.

"O, but you are *here*," she murmured, realizing her mistake. "How absurd of me!" and, with a heightened colour, she sank back in confusion.

"Yes, I am here," replied Idris, his heart leaping with

Lorelie Rivière

delight at this proof of her interest in his welfare. "Near the summit of the cliff was a narrow shelf of rock: on this ledge I lay down and waited, with my revolver pointing to the night sky. I knew that my gentleman would peep over again presently to mark my progress. He did. What the kites left of him you'll find at the foot of the cliff."

If pleasure at the death of a fellow-mortal be an anti-Christian feeling, it must be confessed that Lorelie Rivière had little of the Christian in her at that moment.

Now that he had once entered upon his personal history, she would not let him quit it, betraying such interest that Idris almost wondered whether she had a secret motive in wishing to hear his biography.

The most romantic part of his career, however, namely, that relating to the runic ring and the quest for his father, he carefully reserved, giving instead an account of his travels through Europe, and recalling many a curious legend from "out-of-the-way" places.

Long ere Lorelie was sated with these reminiscences the first stars of night glimmered in the blue air above: and, that nothing might be wanting to complete a romantic situation, the moon, rising in all her glory from the depth of ocean, silvered with its radiance the entrance of the cave. The light passed within bringing into relief the statuesque pose of Lorelie's figure. It gleamed on her wealth of raven hair, and hallowed her face with new and mystic beauty, as, with her cheek pillowed on her hands, she sat attentive to Idris, drinking in his words as the fabled Oriental bird is said to drink the moonbeams.

So lovely and interested a listener might well have turned the head of the frostiest hermit. What wonder, then, that the one thought in Idris' mind at this moment was: — "O that this might last forever!"

CHAPTER IX

IDRIS MEETS A RIVAL

OBSERVING a shiver on the part of Lorelie, due to the chilly air, Idris rose to put into effect a plan that had suddenly occurred to him. Charming as the situation was to himself, he had no wish to prolong it at the expense of discomfort to his companion.

“‘Ye gods, I grow a talker.’ I do wrong to sit here inactive. The air is becoming cold. Since no boat has hove in sight it is time we tried to attract one. Some of this timber, piled upon the rocks at the entrance of our cave, and set alight, will ‘contrive a double debt to pay’—of giving warmth to yourself, and of serving as a signal-fire to the coast-guard of Ormsby.”

Collecting a supply of logs and planks, Idris proceeded to form them into a little pyramid upon the boulders outside the mouth of the cavern. He applied a lighted match to the pile, and within a few minutes a glorious bonfire was blazing upon the rock, challenging the pale light of the moon, and flinging a ruddy glow over the breast of the heaving waters around.

“Now, Mademoiselle Rivière, if you will sit in this nook here, you will be both sheltered from the wind and warmed by the fire.”

Lorelie accepted the suggestion: and, as her ankle was still painful, she permitted Idris to assist her to the assigned spot, where she sat, pleased with the cheerful warmth.

Idris Meets a Rival

"This blaze ought surely to be seen and understood as a signal of distress," said Idris.

As he stared at the distant moonlit cliff behind which the town of Ormsby lay hidden, he suddenly became aware that Lorelie was speaking.

"Idris! Idris!"

He turned quickly with a curious feeling. Surely she was not addressing him by his Christian name? Let his name sound ever so silvery as it came from her lips, still, this mode of address in a friendship so recently formed as theirs, was a familiarity which jarred upon him.

"Idris! Idris!" she repeated.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle* Rivière," he replied, with a cold and significant emphasis upon the second word.

But he found her eyes fixed, not upon him, but upon the flames. He followed the direction of her gaze and beheld a surprising sight. There, burning in the fire, was a thick piece of planking, and on the part of it not yet consumed were five black-painted letters, forming in their arrangement the word:—

"I-D-R-I-S!"

His own name! Yes: there it was, plain to be seen on the plank, the black characters shining out clearly through the yellow flame.

Lorelie had simply been murmuring the word as it caught her eyes, without any intention of addressing him by it.

How came his name to be inscribed on this piece of timber? If the materials composing the fire were drift-wood picked up from the beach (and he did not doubt that such was the origin of the timber in the cave), then this plank was probably a relic of a sunken vessel, the word *Idris* forming its name.

Was there any connection between himself and this lost barque other than mere identity of name?

The Viking's Skull

His active mind, eager to give an affirmative to this question, immediately devised a theory. Captain Rochefort, on flying from Brittany with Eric Marville, would be compelled by considerations of safety either to disguise and rename the yacht in which the flight had been effected, or, what was more probable, dispose of the *Nemesis* in some way, and purchase another vessel. That Captain Rochefort had so acted, naming his new barque after the son of his escaped friend, became Idris' firm conviction: for, lost to reason in his excitement, he overlooked the possibility that other yacht-owners might have a partiality for the same name.

The plank now burning before his eyes had come from the figure-head of the yacht in which his father and Captain Rochefort had cruised about, after disposing of the *Nemesis*.

What more likely than that, on discovering the meaning of the Norse runes (a copy of which had been made by Rochefort while the altar-ring was in his possession), the two friends, in a spirit of adventure, should steer their yacht's course to Ormsby, the site of the supposed treasure? And here off this coast their vessel had foundered.

This conclusion, if correct, would seem almost to justify the idea that it was impossible to escape from the malign influence of Odin's ring.

Desire for its possession had led Eric Marville into a mischance that had doomed him to a prison-life: he had escaped from the convict's cell, and had wrested the secret from the runic ring, only to meet with a watery grave in sight of the very treasure-hill that he had come to explore!

But, stay! had Eric Marville and Captain Rochefort perished in the fierce currents of Ormsby Race, or had one, or both, been washed ashore alive? Was the

Idris Meets a Rival

removal of the Viking's treasure due to one of them, or to the joint action of the two?

So occupied was Idris with these thoughts that he had almost forgotten the presence of Lorelie, but now, on glancing at her, he noticed that her face wore a grave, not to say startled, expression, obviously due to the name that had been so strangely presented to her view. The discovery seemed to disquiet her as much as it disquieted himself.

Then in a moment it occurred to him that the dead in Saint Oswald's Churchyard, whose grave she was decking with a marble cross, were men who had perished in the sinking of this same vessel, *The Idris*. Lorelie could explain the mystery, if she chose. He resolved to question her.

"Mademoiselle Rivière," he began, in an earnest tone, "I believe it is within your power to throw some light upon a matter that, to me, is one almost of life and death. Pardon me, if I presume too much on our very recent friendship. To come to the point, I beg, nay, I entreat of you, to tell me all you know concerning the vessel whose timbers we see burning before us, the yacht *Idris*, that went down in Ormsby Race on the night of the thirteenth of October, 1876."

Swift surprise stole over Lorelie's face.

"And why should you think that *I* know anything of that lost vessel?"

"Ah! mademoiselle, you are not erecting a costly memorial over the grave of men of whom you know nothing."

Lorelie was silent for a few moments, as if reflecting how to answer an obviously embarrassing question.

"It is true," she said at last. "I will admit that I *do* know something of that lost vessel, and that I have taken a deep interest in it."

The Viking's Skull

“The vessel carried some one dear to you?”

“Really, Mr. Breakspear, you are very curious,” she cried, with a flash of her bright eyes. “Before answering I must know the motive for this catechism.”

“I have reason to believe,” answered Idris, “that there was on board one, Eric Marville by name.”

“And what,” asked Lorelie — and at the chilling fall in her voice Idris started — “what is Eric Marville to you, that you should take an interest in his fate?”

For a moment Idris hesitated, loth to tell the woman whom he loved that he was the son of a fugitive convict. Then he resolved to be frank, believing that if she were a true woman she would not despise him for a misfortune not of his own causing.

“Eric Marville,” he answered humbly, “is my father’s name.”

At these words Lorelie Rivière shrank back in the Hermit’s Seat, staring at Idris, her face white, her hand lifted to her side.

“Your father?” she gasped. “You Eric Marville’s son — *you*?”

“The same, mademoiselle.”

“No, no. It cannot be. You have said that your name is Breakspear.”

“For obvious reasons I have thought proper to assume my mother’s maiden name.”

“Eric Marville’s son!” she repeated wildly. “Impossible! I will not believe it.” Her wildness suddenly gave way to an air of disdain, and she exclaimed: “Why do you seek to impose upon me? Idris Marville was burned to death at Paris seven years ago.”

“Not so,” replied Idris, with a smile, as he proceeded to give his reasons for permitting himself to be advertised as dead.

As Lorelie became gradually convinced of his identity

Idris Meets a Rival

a look of dismay came over her face. She shrank from him, and glanced down upon the sea, as if tempted to plunge beneath its surface.

"To think that you, you of all persons," she murmured in a tone of awe, "should have saved my life!"

"Then by that fact, mademoiselle, I entreat you to tell me whether my father perished in that shipwreck. You doubtless know something of his sad history?"

"I ought to know," she returned, "seeing that my real name is Lorelie Rochefort."

"What do you say?" cried Idris in amazement. "You are the daughter of Captain Noel Rochefort?"

She inclined her head in assent.

"Then we shall be the best of friends, as our fathers were before us."

"You speak without knowledge," she replied, with a curious dry laugh.

"Did not Captain Rochefort prove his friendship by aiding my father to escape?"

"At my mother's urging: he would not otherwise have moved in the matter."

"Why was Madame Rochefort so anxious to see my father free?"

"You must not ask me that," replied Lorelie quickly, and looking alarmed the moment afterwards, as if betrayed into a rash statement.

This was certainly a strange answer, and Idris pondered over it in the silence that followed. There seemed no other explanation of her words than that there had existed a guilty love-intrigue between Madame Rochefort and Eric Marville. Was it possible that Lorelie herself was the offspring of——? With a shiver he put the suspicion aside. No: he would not think *that!*

"Is Captain Rochefort still living?"

"It is extremely unlikely."

The Viking's Skull

"He went down with the yacht *Idris*?"

"In all probability."

"He was not among the bodies washed ashore?"

"They were bruised and swollen beyond recognition."

"Was my father on board the yacht the night it sank?"

"So far as I have been able to gather he was not."

"Not?" said Idris, in a tone of joy. "Then he may still be living. May I ask, mademoiselle, how you have learned this?"

"From my father's last letter to my mother, with whom he kept up a correspondence during his cruise. The letter is dated 'The yacht *Idris*. In Ormsby Roads, October 13th, 1876. 7 P. M.,' and the postscript is something to this effect, 'Marville is going ashore, leaving me aboard. He will not return till the morrow. I am despatching this letter to the post by the sailor who rows Marville ashore.' Those are the last words my mother received. That same night, four hours after the letter was written, the *Idris* went down."

"And you cannot tell me whether my father is living to-day?"

"I know nothing more of Eric Marville since the night of the wreck."

"You have preserved all your father's letters?"

"Naturally."

Idris here ventured on a very bold request.

"Would it be asking too much to let me see this correspondence, or at least, some part of it?"

"Not if you were to give me a diamond for each word it contained," she said firmly.

"At least, mademoiselle," he continued more humbly, "you will give me the purport of those passages that relate to my father?"

"That would be to compromise myself."

Idris Meets a Rival

“Whatever secrets those letters contain shall be respected by me.”

“Not so,” said Lorelie sadly. “Mr. Breakspear, Idris Marville, or whatever name you will, I believe you to be a man of honour——”

“Then why not trust me?”

“Because you would consider yourself justified in breaking your pledge of secrecy. I dare not trust you. No oath could be binding in such a case as this. You would proclaim aloud to the world the contents of those letters.”

In spite of her words, Idris, with justifiable curiosity, continued to press her with questions relative to his father's movements after the flight from Quilaix, but to all his interrogations Lorelie remained coldly mute.

“And you will tell me nothing more than you have told?” he said at last.

His sorrowful tone seemed to touch her to the quick. The icy expression faded from her face and gave way to one of warmth and tenderness. Her eyes became luminous with tears, but, as if desirous of resisting his pleading, she averted her head and hid her face in her hands.

“Do not question me further,” she entreated. “Not to answer is painful, but to answer would be more painful still. O, why did you reveal your true name? I shall never be happy again. If I had but known you twelve months ago, all would have been well, but now——now it is too late. In revealing what you wish, nay, what you ought to know, I should be injuring the interests of, not myself, for that would matter little, but the interests of others. You do not understand——how should you?——but some day you will learn my meaning, and then——and then——” her voice faltered, “how the world will despise me! you more than all others.

The Viking's Skull

Mr. Breakspear, if you knew my real character you would have left me lying on the sand to be overwhelmed by the tide. I would that you had !”

Though Idris knew not what meaning to affix to this speech, it did not abate in one degree his love for her : nay, her very air of humiliation, plaintive and touching, served only to enhance her attractiveness. When he recalled the heroic look upon her face in the presence of death, and the clasping of her hands in prayer upon her deliverance, he could not bring himself to think ill of her. Her mysterious self-accusations must be the result of some delusion : or, if something *did* attach to her that the world would call guilt, he did not doubt that justification would be found for it.

“ Mademoiselle,” he replied, with a grave smile, “ you seem to regard me in the light of an enemy, when my chief desire is to occupy a high place in your friendship.” He would have said “ heart ” had he dared. “ Since the subject of the yacht is painful to you, I will not refer to it again in your presence.”

“ Then my reticence will not make an enemy of you ? ” asked Lorelie, raising her beautiful eyes with a yearning in them that moved him strangely.

“ Certainly not, mademoiselle : Let me know that you do not despise me on account of my father’s guilt, or supposed guilt, and I am content.”

“ Despise you ? Oh, no ! How can you say that ? Mr. Breakspear,” she continued, with a faltering voice, “ if — if there be one circumstance more than another that enlists my sympathies in your behalf, it is — the — the event of which you speak.”

The pitying look in her eyes caused Idris’ blood to course like liquid fire through his veins. Had she been the guiltiest woman living that glance would have palliated all and have made him her slave forever.

Idris Meets a Rival

There is no knowing what he might have said or done at this moment had he not been checked by a sudden exclamation from her. Looking in the direction indicated by her he saw a boat rowed by seven of the Ormsby fishermen coming over the waves towards them in gallant style.

“Our imprisonment is drawing to an end,” said Idris, adding to himself, “the more’s the pity.”

The sight of the approaching boat seemed to put an end to Lorelie’s emotion. She began to regain something of her former sweet self.

By her own unaided efforts she rose to her feet, and leaning against the rock, waved her handkerchief as an encouragement to the rowers. A cheer broke from the men as soon as they recognized her; for, by reason of her liberality to the poor of Ormsby, Mademoiselle Rivière had become, at least among the lower orders of the town, a favourite second only to Beatrice Ravengar herself.

Ere long the boat’s side grated against the rock, and Lorelie, assisted by Idris on the one hand, and by a gallant fisherman on the other, was lifted down from point to point, and finally lodged in the bow of the rocking boat, Idris taking his seat beside her.

The still-flaming timbers of the fire having been extinguished by the easy process of tossing them into the sea, the men pushed off, and the Hermit’s Cave rapidly receded from view.

In answer to the questioning of her rescuers Lorelie gave an account of the circumstances which had led to the enforced captivity of herself and Idris, adding:—

“We owe you something more substantial than thanks for responding so quickly to our fire-signal.”

“Lord bless you!” responded one of the crew gallantly, “to rescue such a bonny bird we would row fifty miles.”

The Viking's Skull

They created quite a sensation as they drew near the beach of Ormsby, where a miscellaneous crowd was assembled; for the news had been spread abroad by Lorelie's frightened maid that her mistress had been missing since the morning, and, accordingly, it had been conjectured that the strange light visible at the foot of the distant cliff might have some connection with her disappearance. And when it was seen that the approaching boat contained the missing lady there arose an outburst of cheering and a waving of hats, that drew the colour to her hitherto pale cheek.

Among the first to meet the boat at the water's edge was Godfrey; and on learning that Lorelie had hurt her foot, nothing less would satisfy him than an immediate inspection of her ankle.

"The case may be more serious than you think it," said he.

So Lorelie, escorted by Idris and Godfrey, repaired, under smiling protest, to the parlour of a cottage fronting the beach, where, after due examination, the surgeon pronounced the injury to be nothing more serious than a sprain.

"Still, you must not set your foot to the ground just yet," he added. "We will procure a carriage to take you home."

Scarcely had he said this when the rattle of wheels was heard outside. A vehicle of some sort had drawn up in front of the cottage. A minute afterwards the parlour door opened giving entrance to Viscount Walden.

His acknowledgment of the surgeon was limited to, "Ah! Godfrey:" of Idris he took no notice at all. Walking up to Lorelie he smiled in a manner which showed that they were no strangers to each other, and Godfrey, recalling the viscount's utterances in the crypt of Rayenhall, "I hope Lorelie will be satisfied," looked

Idris Meets a Rival

on at their meeting with considerable interest, wondering whether there really were some guilty secret between them.

“Mademoiselle Rivière, I am delighted to meet you in England,” said Ivar. “Passing along the road outside and observing the crowd in front of this cottage I stopped my carriage to ascertain the cause. Imagine my surprise on learning that *you* were within. Welcome to Ormsby! You find our climate a little trying, I expect, after the sunny air and the blue skies of the Riviera? You have sprained your ankle, I understand, and find a difficulty in walking. If you desire a carriage to convey you home, mine is at your service.”

Ivar’s proposal to carry off Lorelie in his own carriage roused all Idris’ jealousy, of which he had the ordinary mortal’s share. It was not very agreeable to hear Lorelie assenting, and to observe that she smiled upon Ivar as pleasantly as she had smiled upon himself.

With a motion of her hand she directed the viscount’s attention to Idris.

“Lord Walden, Mr. ——”

“Breakspear,” interposed Idris quickly, fearing lest she should inadvertently pronounce the name of Marville.

Lorelie gave him a sympathetic glance, which assured him that his secret was quite safe in her keeping.

“Lord Walden,” she continued, “Mr. Breakspear, a gentleman to whom I owe my life.”

In some surprise Ivar turned to survey the saviour of Mademoiselle Rivière, and beheld a man of about thirty years, with fine dark eyes and an athletic figure — a man evidently of good birth; his countenance expressive of a spirit that showed if he should set his mind upon accomplishing an object, say of winning a woman’s love, he would succeed, or make it go extremely ill with those who

The Viking's Skull

endeavoured to thwart him: and, noting all this, Ivar, who was of a mean nature, took secret umbrage.

Idris was about to offer his hand, but observing that the viscount was stiffly bowing with his hands behind him, he thought he could not do better than imitate the other's example.

For a moment the two men eyed each other, both apparently animated by a spirit of defiance, the cause of which was patent enough to Godfrey in the person of the charming woman sitting between them.

Idris, mindful of the fact that he was the son of an escaped convict, while Ivar was the descendant of a line of belted earls, felt bitterly the contrast between their respective positions.

"How this fellow would sneer, if he knew the truth!" was his thought.

"Lord save us!" the woman, who owned the cottage, whispered to Godfrey. "How like they are! The same proud face upon each!"

The surgeon glanced from one to the other, and was compelled to admit that there certainly *was* a resemblance in features between the two men, a resemblance which would have been the stronger, had not Idris been dark, and Ivar fair.

While Lorelie gave a brief account of her rescue, Ivar listened with impatience, evidently of opinion that Fortune, while permitting Idris to save Mademoiselle Rivière, might at least have had the good sense to drown him afterwards.

"At the next Parish Council," said Lorelie to Godfrey, "you must call attention to the 'Stairs of David.'"

"The ladder ought certainly to be seen to," said Idris, "but for my part, mademoiselle," he added, bowing to Lorelie, "I shall never regret the instability of that structure."

Idris Meets a Rival

Ivar, who had refrained from speech both during Lorelie's story and at its close, now offered his arm to help her to the carriage. A shade of vexation passed over her face at the viscount's obvious indifference to Idris' services on her behalf.

"My ankle is still weak," she said, turning to Idris. "Mr. Breakspear, may I ask for your help, too?"

Idris responded with a cheerfulness that became the more cheerful as he noticed Ivar's scowl.

Thus escorted Lorelie passed into the moonlit air without, and reached the brougham. Idris held the door while she stepped in. The viscount followed, shutting the door with a loud slam, that said as plainly as words, "No more shall enter here."

Lorelie looked more vexed than ever at this discourtesy towards Godfrey and Idris: but as the carriage was not hers it was out of her power to offer them a seat.

However, as if desirous of sweetening the parting, she extended her little hand through the carriage-window, accompanying her action with a gracious smile.

"Good-night, Mr. Breakspear," she murmured, softly. "I shall never forget the debt I owe you."

"Drive on," cried Ivar, brusquely, to the coachman. "The Cedars, North Road."

The horses dashed off, and as the brougham turned the corner of the road, Idris caught a glimpse of Lorelie, bending forward at the carriage-window, with her face turned in his direction.

He lifted his hat, and the next moment she was lost to view.

"Idris," said Godfrey, "you love that young lady."

"And you must have a heart of stone not to love her, too."

"Humph! it would be rather awkward if all men were

The Viking's Skull

to desire the same woman. Isn't one rival enough for you?"

Truth to tell, Idris had been much disquieted by the readiness with which Lorelie had surrendered herself to the will of Viscount Walden. It seemed almost as if some secret understanding existed between them. Godfrey, though he refrained from saying so, had no doubt whatever on the point.

"All things being equal," he continued, "I believe the lady would favour you: but, you see, a prospective coronet is a very powerful attraction, and I fear the coronet will gain the day."

Idris repudiated this forecast, vigorously anathematizing the name of Viscount Walden, after which his thoughts turned to a theme, almost equal in interest to his love for Lorelie, namely, his father's fate.

"He was not on the yacht when it sank, so Mademoiselle Rivière declares: then what became of him? I did right to come to Ormsby, it seems, since it was in this neighbourhood that he was last heard of. But, alas! that was twenty-two years ago. Is he living to-day, and shall I ever find him?"

CHAPTER X

A LITTLE PIECE OF STEEL

THE clock was striking the hour of ten at night as Beatrice Ravengar rose to put away the embroidery with which she had been occupied.

Save for the companionship of her faithful St. Bernard she was alone. Godfrey was out visiting his patients. Idris had been absent since noon, and Beatrice wondered what had become of him, little thinking that he was passing his time in a moonlit cave, *tête-à-tête* with Mademoiselle Rivière. The page-boy, who was accustomed to sleep at his own home, had taken his departure: and as for the housemaid, well, every one knows that when housemaids promise to be home punctually by nine P. M., they mean any time up to eleven, and Beatrice's little domestic was no exception to this rule.

Methodical in all her ways Beatrice was in the habit of mapping out beforehand a certain amount of work to be done during the day. Her self-allotted tasks being now completed she was ready for bed, but could not think of retiring before the return of the absentees.

With a little yawn she wondered what she should do to fill up the gap of time, and seeing a book lying upon the table, one that Idris had been reading earlier in the day, she took it up and found it to be a novel.

Beatrice as a rule avoided fiction, but on the present occasion she felt herself unequal to anything but the lightest kind of literary confectionery, and, accordingly, settling herself comfortably in her armchair, she began to read the novel, which bore the title of "*The Fair Ori-*

The Viking's Skull

entalist." It was of the nightmare order, and dealt with the doings of an Eastern lady, gifted with occult powers.

After the first chapter Beatrice glanced down to make sure that the faithful Leo was lying at her feet: when reading a story of the supernatural at night it is good to have a companion with us, though that companion be but a dog.

Having finished the second chapter she threw a glance at the windows, and was glad to observe that the blinds were drawn, since at night-time panes of glass are sometimes apt to reflect the gaslight in such a way as to create the impression that there are eyes on the outside watching us.

At the end of the third chapter Beatrice had become positively alarmed at the clairvoyance and occult powers ascribed to the Oriental lady: and yet, so fascinated was she by the story that, despite her growing fears, she found it impossible to lay down the book.

Hark! what was that?

A sound, coming apparently from the upper storey, echoed through the lonely house. With a beating heart Beatrice ceased reading, and listened. The sound was repeated, and she smiled at her fears. The latticed window at the head of the staircase was open, and flapping idly on its hinges. That was all!

This thought, however, was quickly followed by another that revived her uneasiness. Since the casement had been ajar all the evening why had it not flapped before?

"The wind must be rising," thought Beatrice: and with this reasonable explanation she resumed her reading.

O, that window!

It persisted in flapping to and fro at intervals, the irregularity of which was the most annoying part of the matter.

A Little Piece of Steel

Sometimes the sound was so faint as to be scarcely audible: then, after a lapse of silence so long as to promise that the torment had altogether ceased, the casement would give a rattle louder than ever, and more startling by contrast with the previous stillness. A little more force on the part of the wind would result in the shattering of those diamond panes.

“ I must go up and shut it ! ”

Sensible resolve! But it was not carried out. The incident, trifling though it was, combined with the effect of the novel, had reduced her to a state of nervousness so great that she durst not ascend the staircase to close the window. Despising herself for her cowardice she remained in her armchair, neglecting the only effectual way of ending the annoyance.

She glanced again at the dog, and derived some assurance from his quiet air. Though wideawake he did not display any signs of alarm.

“ One advantage brute creatures have over the human,” thought she. “ *They* never frighten themselves with ghostly fears.”

She again fixed her eyes upon the book, endeavouring to ignore the real terror by a forced attention to an imaginary one, a literary homæopathy that was scarcely likely to be successful.

One of the powers possessed by the Fair Orientalist was that of enduing inanimate objects with her own magnetism by virtue of which they became gifted for the time being with sentience and motion.

The fancy now seized Beatrice, so deeply had she fallen under the spell of the weird romance, that the restless casement above was moved by similar means, and that its flapping was designed to call her attention to — she knew not what. A strange idea! But it grew upon her, and increased till it filled her mind to the exclusion

The Viking's Skull

of everything else. The book, neglected, slid from her knees, and she sat listening to the swinging of the casement. And as it is possible to tell the mood of a musician by the notes he plays, so Beatrice fancied she could detect a meaning in each variation of sound.

First, there was a sharp slam intended primarily to arrest attention, like the ting-ting of the telegraph operator: next, a low plaintive swing beseeching her to ascend the stairs and come to the rescue, followed by a remonstratory flap censuring her for delaying. Then ensued a slow solemn sound suggestive of the gravity of the situation: finally, there came a loud rattle that echoed through the house as if threatening penalties for her negligence.

The geologist will read history in a cliff: Beatrice read a whole tragedy in the varying tones of that casement.

And now, a mysterious influence, emanating from the latticed window, seemed to steal silently down the staircase like a ghost, and entering the apartment where she sat and enwrapping her with an unseen pall of horror, whispered a thought that swept all the warmth from her body and left her icy-cold.

The Viking's skull!

At the head of the staircase, on the ledge of the embrasured window, was the grim memorial, taken at midnight from the sepulchral mound. Beatrice's mind became impressed with the belief that the casement was flapping in sympathy with the skull, was its mouthpiece, so to speak — nay more, that the dread relic itself was moaning to be taken back to its ancient resting-place. Her quickening fancy drew a picture of the skull, whispering, nodding, grinning, its hollow orbs illumined with blue, phosphorescent light.

Gazing fearfully at the door she saw that it was open.

A Little Piece of Steel

She must close it ere the horrid object should come gliding down the staircase into the room.

Summoning up her small amount of remaining courage Beatrice rose, and with timid, staccato steps, approached the door, attended by Leo. Mute as a statue she stood in the attitude of listening, her fingers on the door-handle.

Was it the voice of the breeze sighing through the half-opened casement, or was it the skull whispering and chuckling with ghostly glee? She had but to step forward two paces to be within the corridor, and by looking up the staircase would see the skull at its head.

But this was more than she durst do. To her dismay Leo had walked out of the room, and refused to return. She could not shut the door upon the dog: in her present state of mind his presence was an absolute necessity, and yet, to venture out into the passage to bring him back, and by so doing come within sight of the skull, was a feat beyond her courage.

The corridor-lamp had not been lighted. The glory of the full moon shone on the staircase window at such an angle that the outline of the casement was projected upon the floor of the passage directly within view of the door at which she was standing. She could not avoid seeing the oblong patch of spectral white. But that shadow in the centre like a human head, black and still as if nailed to the flooring! It was the silhouette of the skull!

Trembling, she averted her eyes from the shadow, and fortunately at that moment Leo, having decided that the room was more comfortable than the corridor, reentered the apartment, and Beatrice instantly closed the door and turned the key, feeling more at ease now that an inch of oak interposed between herself and the object at the stair head.

The Viking's Skull

But now came another terror!

Leo had taken his place on the hearth-rug where he remained quiet for a few minutes. Then, suddenly, he began to grow restive. Giving a low growl he started to his feet, and after looking about on all sides began to walk round the room, sniffing suspiciously at the floor, as if he expected danger from the cellar below rather than from the staircase above.

His investigations concluded, the poor brute sat down on his haunches, and lifting up his head gave utterance to one long and plaintive howl. And if ever dog uttered prophecy Leo uttered it at that moment, and the tenor of his prediction was that some dire peril was at hand.

Beatrice, who had followed the animal from one part of the room to another, repeating "Leo, Leo, what's the matter?" as if he were capable of speech, knelt by his side and found him quivering in every limb, his hair bristling as if with fear.

Hark!

A gust of wind, more forcible than any that had preceded it, slammed the staircase window with a loud bang, shivering its diamond panes: and — more alarming still! — this accident was accompanied by a sound like the fall of some light object.

Beatrice doubted not for a moment that the skull had dropped from the ledge and was now coming down the staircase.

Nor did she err. A second bump told her that the thing had rolled over one stair. A third fall ensued, and then a fourth. These sounds did not follow instantaneously one upon another, but there was between each a distinct pause, suggestive of the idea that the skull was endowed with a volition and a motion of its own: as if, in fact, it were choosing its way, and descending at leisure.

A Little Piece of Steel

Awaiting the issue Beatrice sat, the very picture of terror, her hands clasped, her dilated eyes riveted on the door of the apartment. It seemed many minutes since the skull had begun its descent, though, perhaps, fifteen seconds had scarcely elapsed. Finally, the lowest stair was reached, and the skull, pitching forward, rolled up to the door of the apartment, as if seeking admittance.

At its dread knock the walls and floor of the room seemed to tremble. The lights in the gasolier went out, leaving the chamber in semi-darkness. The dying embers of the fire, flickering strangely and unsteadily, caused weird shapes to spring up from floor to ceiling.

At the same time a vibratory motion was communicated to Beatrice's person. She found herself oscillating to and fro, unable to check herself. A mysterious power grasped her ankles with unseen fingers and strove to elevate her in air.

Fully believing that her last hour had come Beatrice gave one long pealing cry, in which the terrified yelp of the dog mingled. She was shot violently forward: a noise like the rattle produced by a thousand falling plates rang in her ears, and tumbling headlong to the carpet she lost all consciousness.

* * * * *

When Beatrice next opened her eyes she found herself lying on the sofa with three persons standing beside her: Godfrey was sprinkling her face and throat with cold water: the housemaid was applying a bottle of strong salts to her nostrils: and Idris was holding a candle, the feeble light of which he strove to steady by shielding it with his hand. The windows and door were wide open, and the cool night air was blowing through the room, laden with a faint odour of escaped gas.

Beatrice gave a feeble smile of recognition, and then

The Viking's Skull

gazed vacantly around the apartment, unable at first to recall what had preceded the present state of affairs.

The room presented a scene of confusion. All the pictures hung awry: the ornaments of the mantel had fallen, and lay, some shattered to pieces, within the fireplace: fragments of one of the gasalier globes starred the carpet: the doors of the bookcase were open, and many of the volumes had been projected from their shelves to the floor. On the table was the Viking's skull, the cause, in some mysterious way, of all this disorder; at least, such was Beatrice's opinion.

"I have been horribly frightened!" she said, as soon as she had recovered the use of speech.

"And well you might be!" replied Idris. "Godfrey and I had just reached the door, when the house shook to its foundations, and out went all the lights. By heaven! I thought the place was coming down. We have had an earthquake shock."

But the imaginative mind of Beatrice, still under the spell of "*The Fair Orientalist*," was not prepared to accept this rational explanation.

"Earthquakes don't happen in England," she declared.

"Slight shocks occasionally occur here," said Idris, "and the present one is a case in point. Why," he added, observing Beatrice's dissentient shake of her head, "what else could it have been?"

"I cannot say," she answered, shivering, and glancing at the Viking's skull. "But this much I know, that long before the house shook and the gas went out, I was frightened by strange sounds coming from the head of the staircase where the skull was, and so — and so —"

And here Beatrice paused, not knowing how to express to others that which was not very clear to herself.

"And so you began to think that the skull was talking

A Little Piece of Steel

and threatening you with mystic oracles? Fie, Trixie," said her brother, reprovingly. "I did not think you could be so foolish."

But perceiving that it would be useless at this juncture to try to reason her out of her belief, such process being best reserved for the sober light of morning, Godfrey turned to give some orders to the housemaid.

"Ha!" exclaimed Idris, picking up the novel from the floor, "so you have been reading this? Then I don't wonder that you have been frightened. '*The Fair Orientalist*' is not a book to be read at night in a lonely house."

"I will not deny that the book frightened me, but what was it that frightened Leo? *He* cannot read ghost-stories, and yet he howled piteously."

"Probably with that prevision instinctive in the brute race he discerned the coming of this catastrophe."

Beatrice, having now recovered herself, proposed a tour of the house with a view of ascertaining how much damage had been done.

The walls did not exhibit any cracks or fissures, and apparently were as sound as before, but on the floor of every room proofs of the recent earth-tremor were evident in the shape of fallen articles.

Breakage was especially triumphant in the kitchen.

"Ah me!" sighed Beatrice, sorrowfully. "Good-bye to my new tea-service! And my pretty majolica bread-plate gone, too! Nothing will convince me that this is not the work of the Viking. When he was alive I have no doubt that, being a heathen, he took a pleasure in slaying good Christian folk: and now that he is dead he shows his malignity by destroying their crockery-ware. A noble Viking, one would think, should be above such meanness."

On returning to the sitting-room Idris, for the enlight-

The Viking's Skull

enment of Beatrice, began to relate his adventure with Mademoiselle Rivière; and, as Beatrice listened, she became strangely disquieted by the incident. Why should this be?

But when Idris, in the course of his story, dwelt on the beauty of Lorelie, and above all on the heroic light of her eyes when she bade him leave her to save himself, Beatrice readily discerned by the warmth of his tone how matters stood with him, and realizing this, her agitation increased. Surprised, frightened, trembling, she found herself borne along on the wild wave of her emotion to the certain knowledge that her feelings towards Idris were not those of friendship simply, but of love!

And perceiving how deeply enthralled he was by the witchery of Lorelie Rivière her mind became tortured with exquisite pain.

Fearing that Idris and Godfrey might observe her emotion and divine its cause, she seized a favourable moment to steal from the apartment, without so little as a "Good-night," lest her voice should betray her.

And on attaining her dainty bedroom she flung herself upon the bed and gave way to emotion, despising herself as foolish, and yet unable to check her tears.

"If he but knew her true character!" she murmured: "If he but knew! But it is not for me to tell him. He will—he must learn it in time. And then—and then—perhaps—it may be—that——"

But Beatrice put this hope from her as too delightful ever to be realized.

"Now to examine my noble Viking," said Idris, taking up the skull from the table. "Let us see whether he has suffered any injury in his roll down-stairs.—Hul-lo!"

Shaking the skull as he spoke, his attention was arrested by a faint rattle within it, a sound that he had not heard in his previous handlings of the relic.

A Little Piece of Steel

"Listen, Godfrey!" he cried in a curious tone of voice, and shaking the skull again. "What is this inside?"

He stopped the motion to examine the skull more carefully. Strange that till this moment he had not noticed that the occipital bone was pierced by a tiny hole of circular shape!

"Do you see this, Godfrey?" he said, pointing out the orifice. "This could have been caused only by a sharp-pointed instrument. The thing rattling within must be a fragment of some weapon."

He gave the skull another shake, when, from the vertebral orifice there dropped a piece of rusty steel about two inches in length, slender, rounded, and tapering to a point.

"No one could live with a thing like this in his head," said Idris. "So it is clear that we have here a fragment of the identical weapon that gave old Orm his *coup-de-grâce*."

A tiny piece of steel publicly exposed, say in a shop-window, will attract little, if any notice: but let it be known that the said steel is the instrument with which a murder has been wrought, and a whole city will come trooping forth to view: and fancy prices will be offered for it by connoisseurs of the gruesome.

Deep, therefore, was the interest with which the two friends viewed their latest discovery.

"Then this cannot be the skull of Orm the Viking," remarked Godfrey, after a thoughtful pause, "if the tapestry we brought away from the tomb is to be received as an authority, since that represents him as slain by an arrow piercing his breast."

This contradiction between the evidence presented by the skull and that presented by the tapestry, perplexed Idris in no small degree. Having conceived the somewhat pleasing notion that he was the possessor of the

The Viking's Skull

skull of Orm the Golden, he was loth to relinquish his belief, and prepared to argue the point.

“Artists, whether in needlework or in oils, are not always to be accepted as historic authorities. I have no doubt *suppressio veri* was practised as much in the Viking age as in our own. If Orm died with a wound in the occiput, what does that seem to show? That he must have turned his back on his foes in defiance of the canons of Norse bravery. Do you think that the weavers of the tapestry would let posterity know that Orm had turned coward? No! therefore they make him die with an arrow in his breast, facing the foe, bold to the last. The tumulus in Ravensdale is certainly Orm's tomb: the name Ormfell and the tapestry prove it, and hence the bones it contains must be those of Orm.”

“Hum! I'm not convinced,” replied Godfrey. “You believe this steel to be the fragment of a battle-weapon: of what kind of weapon? It is too slender to have formed part of a sword or a dagger: too finely-pointed to have been the barb of a lance or an arrow.”

“It may be a spike from that sort of mace which the Vikings in their playful way were wont to call their ‘Morning Star.’ This is perhaps a stellar ray.”

“Rather fragile for the spike of a mace, isn't it?”

“True. I confess I am as much puzzled as yourself to name the weapon of which this once formed part.”

For a long time Idris continued to puzzle over the question, polishing the steel fragment till it gleamed with a silvery-azure light. He suggested its connection with all kinds of impossible weapons, but could come to no satisfactory conclusion. Then, vexed by Godfrey's scepticism, he said:—

“Well, old wiseacre, if this be not Orm's skull, tell me whose it is?”

“Impossible to say—at present. My opinion is that

A Little Piece of Steel

it is not an ancient skull at all, but a modern one. The future will perhaps show whether I am right. As 'there's a Divinity that shapes' human affairs, it may be that the earthquake of to-night has been sent for a purpose. It has had the effect of loosening the fragment of steel hitherto immovably fixed in the cavity of the skull. You will, perhaps, consider me fanciful, Idris, but I have a presentiment that we are on the threshold of a startling discovery to which this piece of steel forms a clue."

CHAPTER XI

THE LEGEND OF THE RUNIC RING

ON the morning after his adventure on the sea-shore Idris went out with the intention of calling upon Mademoiselle Rivière: and that he might not lack reasonable pretext for his visit, he took with him the book which she had asked him to return. Apart altogether from the charm of her beauty Lorelie interested him, both as being the daughter of Captain Rochefort, and likewise as the depositary of some strange secret relating to his father's history. Though earnestly pressed by Idris she had firmly declined to give any account of Eric Marville from the time of his escape to the sinking of the yacht in Ormsby Race. It was difficult to assign a motive for her refusal, but Idris did not doubt that in course of time he would be able to overcome her reticence: and therefore, if only on this account, Lorelie Rivière was a person whose friendship it behoved him to cultivate.

The way to her villa, The Cedars, took him past Saint Oswald's Church, and moved by a sudden impulse, he turned aside to enter the edifice, which in more than one sense was hallowed ground to him, inasmuch as it was here that he had first met with Lorelie.

Surely Eros was directing his steps! For, scarcely had he passed within the porch of the Ravengar Chantry when his ear caught the soft rustle of silk, and Mademoiselle Rivière herself was standing before him. She had entered by another door, and the basket of flowers hanging from her arm seemed to indicate that

The Legend of the Runic Ring

her object in visiting the church was to deck its altar. Dressed in a graceful costume of black and silver that harmonized exquisitely with her delicate complexion she looked more beautiful and witching than ever in Idris' eyes, as with a bright smile she extended her hand.

"And your sprained ankle?" he asked, when their first greetings were over.

"Is not my presence here a satisfactory answer to that question?" she smiled.

"May I ask for a flower in exchange, mademoiselle?" said Idris, as he returned the book to her.

"Here is variety to choose from. Let me learn your favourite."

She held out the basket for Idris to make his choice.

"You are taking nothing but forget-me-nots," she cried.

"I am in a parabolical mood, you see. The name of this flower expresses what my lips would say."

"And thereby you accuse me of ingratitude."

"How so?"

"By suggesting the possibility of my forgetting one who has saved my life," replied Lorelie, the colour stealing over her cheek. She raised her eyes to his with an expression in them that thrilled him, and continued, "Shall I tell you the dream I had last night? I thought I was still lying on those sands where I fell, unable to move. The rising tide came on and rippled around me, striking a chill through my clothing. At last the water was so high that it flowed over my face, filling my mouth and nostrils. I fought with it, but it ascended higher and ever higher above me, till I was deep down below the surface.

"And the curious part of it all was that I still lived. I lay there as in a trance, motionless, staring upwards. I could see the air-bubbles of my breath ascending to the

The Viking's Skull

surface. The moon with tremulous motion shone through the glassy water, looking—oh! ever so far away. The sea-weed drifted around and clung to my cheek and hair. Curious sea-monsters came and looked at me, then went away again: shell-fish crawled over me, and all night long the restless water flowed over my face and plashed in and out of my mouth. Its faint murmur rings in my ears still. In the morning I awoke and found it a dream. Then I said to myself, 'This is what would have happened if—if no one had been near to aid me.' ”

“It is past now,” replied Idris, observing her shiver. “Don't think any more about it.”

“The peril is past, but the memory of it remains. Ah, that dream! If it should occur again to-night I shall begin to be like Richard III, and tremble at the thought of sleep. Shall I put those flowers in your coat, Mr. Breakspear? You seem to find it a difficulty.”

Idris readily accepted her proffered aid.

“Forget-me-not,” she murmured, fastening the nosegay to his button-hole; and Idris wondered whether the words were addressed to him, or whether she was simply repeating the name of the flower: the latter it seemed by her next remark. “Why should our French *myosotis* be called in English, 'Forget-me-not'? Can you tell me the origin of the name?”

Idris could, and did: relating the somewhat apocryphal story of the youth, who, in wading to the opposite bank of a river with a view of procuring some flowers for his sweetheart, was swept off by the current and drowned, but not before he had had time to fling the flowers at her feet with the parting cry of “Forget-me-not!”

“The moral of which is,” added Idris, “learn to swim.”

“You are spoiling a pretty story by your cynicism,”

The Legend of the Runic Ring

said Lorelie. "His love was all the greater if he could not swim."

She turned to arrange her flowers upon the altar of the Ravengar Chantry. Idris was watching her when his eye was caught by a shadow outlined on the stone pavement. The sun was shining through the window above the altar, and casting at his feet glowing splashes of various hues. For a few seconds he continued to stare, doubtful whether he saw aright, and then, slowly raising his gaze, he followed the slanting shaft of coloured light upward from the pavement till his eyes rested upon the stained window.

The central pane was blazoned with the armorial device of the Ravengars. The shield, supported on each side by a raven, in canting allusion to the family name, was charged in the centre with a silver circlet, a thin purple line forming the perimeter.

The runic ring!

Yes: there was its facsimile gleaming from the coloured glass, and seeming in the morning sunlight to sparkle with a new and mysterious significance. That this argent circle was intended to represent the Norse altar-ring Idris had not the shadow of a doubt: and for a moment he felt resentment both against Beatrice and Godfrey: for, familiar as they must be with this coat of arms — Beatrice herself, as a Ravengar, being entitled to assume it — they had made no allusion to it when he was telling them the story of the runic ring. It was singular, too, that he himself should have failed to notice this blazon in his previous visit to this chantry.

What was the reason for its figuring in the Ravengar shield?

Curious stories are often latent within armorial devices, as students of heraldry can testify. Was it possible that this ring had been adopted by the Ravengars of a past

The Viking's Skull

generation because it had been in some way connected with their history?

“Mademoiselle Rivière,” said Idris, impulsively, thinking that she might be able to throw some light upon the matter, “can you tell me whether the Ravengars of past times had any historic reason for decorating their armorial shield with a silver ring?”

“There is an interesting legend to account for it,” she said after a moment’s hesitation, “which you will find in a curious old book entitled, ‘*Traditions of the House of Ravengar.*’”

“You know the story, then? May I not learn it from you rather than from the book?”

“It is a story that will take a long time in the telling.”

This, in Idris’ opinion, was an excellent reason for hearing it. Lorelie found herself unable to resist his persuasive manner: so, sitting down, she proceeded to tell the story with a detail that showed how it had caught her own imagination.

In the ninth century — so ran the legend — there lived a Norse sea-king, who, either from the terror inspired by his arms, or from the gilt figure on the prow of his galley, was called Draco, or “The Dragon.” From the great wealth acquired in his various water-expeditions he gained the additional name of “The Golden.”

Like many other heroes of the north this Draco claimed descent from Odin, and among his hereditaments nothing was more prized by him than the silver altar-ring used in the religious ceremonies of his clan, since it was said to have belonged originally to his divine ancestor.

Draco lived at the time when the Norsemen were sailing by thousands from their own land in order to gain by the sword new and fairer homes in Britain. He, too, determined to have a share in the territorial spoil, and ac-

The Legend of the Runic Ring

cordingly, equipping his dragon-keels, and gathering his warcarls around him, he sailed off over the seas.

On arriving within sight of the Northumbrian coast he had recourse to the gods for fixing the precise point of his disembarkation: he let fly two ravens consecrated to Odin, and following in their wake landed where they had alighted.

He quickly put to the rout those Northumbrians who attempted to oppose him, and proceeded to confirm his victory by building a fortress on the site of the existing Ravenhall. Sallying forth from this place he would plunder the neighbouring monasteries, or, putting out to sea, attack the merchant vessels that passed his shores, thus becoming possessed in course of time, of a vast quantity of treasure in the shape of gold and silver, church-plate, coinage, jewels, and the like.

In his old age he met with the end deemed worthy of a warrior, being slain in battle whilst contending against a neighbouring chieftain. At his burial a Norse scald composed that wild barbaric requiem, which Idris had heard Lorelie playing on the organ — a requiem that had accompanied the funeral of every Ravengar since: though doubtless with considerable variations from the original strain.

Draco left one son only, Magnus by name. He was but a child at the time of his father's death, and the widowed mother, Hilda, fearing that an attempt might be made to deprive him of his patrimonial treasure, secretly buried it, purposing to give it to her son when he should be of age to defend his rights.

For a time all went well. The warriors who had followed the standard of Draco rallied around his son, and looked forward to the day when he should emulate or surpass the deeds of his father. But eventually murmurings arose. The boy was too much under his mother's

The Viking's Skull

influence, they thought: the hand that should have been wielding the spear was more often found holding the pen. She was accused of teaching him dark and curious arts.

It was a long time, however, before the Vikings ventured to express their displeasure openly, for they feared Hilda. She was an Alruna, that is, an *all-runic* or all-wise woman, who had power to cast pernicious spells upon those who offended her.

At last, one day, provoked to the extreme by some act of imprudence on her part, they came to Magnus and telling him that they were going to banish his mother, they gave him the choice of being their chieftain or of accompanying her into exile. Magnus elected to stand with his father's warriors, and, as head of the clan, in full and solemn doom-ring, he pronounced upon his mother sentence of perpetual banishment.

Cut to the heart by this unfilial act Hilda vowed that she would never reveal to him the hiding-place of the treasure: and so, being banished, she returned to her native Norseland, taking with her the silver altar-ring.

With the lapse of time, however, she began to relent towards her absent son. She yearned to see him again, but was now too old to undertake the fatigues attending the voyage. She resolved to break her oath of silence and to tell him where the treasure lay concealed. To secure herself from treachery on the part of her messenger, who might have appropriated the wealth himself if entrusted with the secret of its hiding-place, she had recourse to the following expedient. She engraved upon the altar-ring a sentence indicative of the exact site of the treasure, making use of runic letters, arranged in such a way that none but Magnus could understand them: for cryptic writing had been one of the many arts she had taught him. This done, she despatched the ring by the hand of a herald.

The Legend of the Runic Ring

But Magnus was now dead. His son and successor was Ulric, who, because his lance bore a small pennon decorated with the figure of a raven, was called Ravengar or Raven Spear, a name that became hereditary.

Hilda's messenger entered the hall at the hour when Ulric sat feasting with his warriors. In accordance with the Norse rites of hospitality the herald was given a seat at the board. No question was asked of him, and he resolved to defer his message till the meal should be over. This delay proved fatal to him, for, during the course of the feast, he accidentally drew forth the altar-ring. In a moment the ancient greybeards—old companions of Draco—recognized the sacred relic of Odin, and sternly commanded the stranger to explain how he became possessed of their former chieftain's ring: it had formed a part of the missing treasure: he must, therefore, know where the remainder was.

With a stammering tongue the herald stated that he was a messenger from the Lady Hilda, and pointing to the inscription upon the ring, said that it indicated the hiding-place of the treasure.

Ulric, unskilled in the art of letters, passed the ring on to the sagamen and scalds, who shook their heads over it. Magnus, the only one capable of reading the riddle, was no more. The herald himself was unable to decipher the message that his mistress had caused to be engraved. To the assembled Vikings his words seemed an idle tale: his ignorance was imputed to knavery: swords gleamed in the air: the oaken rafters rang with excited cries.

At one end of the hall on a dais there stood, as was usual in those days, rude images of the gods. To this spot the herald was dragged and told that unless he revealed the hiding-place of the treasure he should be sacrificed there and then to Odin and Thor.

Vain was his plea of ignorance: vain his appeal for

The Viking's Skull

mercy : he was slain by the dagger of Ulric, himself the priest as well as the chief of the clan : the altar-ring was dipped in the blood of the victim, and the red drops were sprinkled on all present. With his dying breath the herald called upon heaven to be his avenger, invoking a curse upon the head of him who should discover the treasure, and praying that the finder might meet with a death as violent as his own.

Afterwards, when Ulric came to clean the ring, he found he could not remove the stain of blood, and the sagamen who examined it declared that the mark would never be effaced till one of the Raven-race should die as an atonement for the death of the herald, whose sacred character had been impiously set at nought.

Ulric retained the ring as the symbol of his authority : at his death it passed to his son, and so from generation to generation it continued in the Ravengar family as a venerated heirloom. In the days of Charles II the first Earl of Ormsby, Lancelot Ravengar, adopted the ring as an armorial device, taking as his supporters two ravens, in allusion to the birds that were said to have directed the course of Draco's galley.

Such was the story of the runic ring, a story to which Idris listened with the deepest interest. It was clear to him that his Viking Orm and Lorelie's Draco were identical, the Norse form of the name having doubtless been changed into its Latin equivalent by the original monkish chronicler.

"And is the ring still in the possession of the Ravensgars?" he asked, when Lorelie had come to the end of her story.

"No : about fifty years ago it was stolen."

"Under what circumstances?"

"The affair was a mystery. The ring was kept with other heirlooms in the jewel-room at Ravenhall. Ac-

The Legend of the Runic Ring

ording to the butler it was secure in its glass case when he locked the door of the jewel-room at night: in the morning it was gone. Suspicion fell upon a steward who was under notice of dismissal: it is supposed that he was actuated by a spirit of revenge. The detectives employed in the case failed, however, to connect him with the theft, nor did their investigations lead to any result so far as regards the recovery of the ring."

"The steward, if he were guilty, probably disposed of the relic on the Continent," said Idris. "At any rate it found its way to Nantes, for the Ravengar heirloom must surely have been the very ring which led to the murder of M. Duchesne and the consequent arrest of my father."

"I believe — nay, I am certain it was," answered Lorelie.

Her eyes drooped and a shadow passed over her face. Any reference to Eric Marville seemed to trouble her, and Idris resolved to avoid the mention of his name.

"And during the many centuries in which this ring was in the possession of the Ravengars," he continued, "was no one ever found capable of deciphering the runic inscription?"

"No one. In time past the ring was submitted to many antiquaries, but they could make nothing of it."

Idris, though justly proud of his success in a matter wherein experts had failed, kept his own counsel for the present, and refrained from mentioning that *he* had accomplished the feat.

"Then, of course, the treasure of old Orm — Draco, I mean — has never been discovered?"

"Not by a Ravengar."

"But by some one else probably. It is not likely that the buried treasure has remained undiscovered for a thousand years."

"The legend says that only a Ravengar can discover

The Viking's Skull

it, and that in the very moment of discovery he will forfeit his life as an atonement for the death of the herald. But this," added Lorelie with a smile, "is, of course, mere poetic fancy."

"There is one omission in your story. You did not state where this sea-king, Draco, was buried."

"The legend does not say. You are forgetting that it *is* a legend, invented, perhaps, by some imaginative king-at-arms in order to decorate the vanity of the first Earl of Ormsby with a long pedigree and a romantic origin."

But Idris had received proofs that the story was true in the main. For example, there had actually existed an altar-ring such as described — for he had seen and handled it himself — a ring engraved with a sentence which not only spoke of a buried treasure, but also bore the names of the very persons, Orm, Hilda, and Magnus, who had figured so prominently in the story. The fragment of tapestry brought from the interior of the ancient tumulus supplied additional evidence as to the historic existence of the Golden Viking and the widowed Hilda.

"This Draco," continued Idris, "if he received the sepulchral honours due to a Norse chief, would be buried beneath an immense mound of earth. If we are to look for his tomb in this neighbourhood we shall perhaps find it in a tumulus on the seashore about four miles from here."

"I know the eminence you refer to," replied Lorelie. "It is called Ormfell, that is, Orm's Hill; and therefore it cannot be Draco's tomb, otherwise it would be called Draconfell, or something similar."

Idris did not stop to show the fallacy of this mode of reasoning, but continued: —

"Has this hillock never been opened by the Earls of Ormsby to see what it contains?"

The Legend of the Runic Ring

“ Not that I am aware of.”

It was strange, Idris thought, that while the tumulus had retained the true Norse name of the Viking, his descendants, the Ravengars, should have remembered him only by his Latinized name of Draco. This explained why Ormfell had never suggested itself to them as the tomb of their ancestor. In forgetting that he was likewise called Orm, they had unwittingly deprived themselves of an indication as to the place of the buried treasure.

Idris' musings were brought to an end by Lorelie's rising to take her departure, which caused him to murmur something about the sadness of parting.

“ But if there were no parting there would never be the sweetness of meeting,” was her reply.

Was this no more than a pretty saying on her part ; or did she really look forward with pleasure to their next meeting ?

Emboldened by her words he raised her hand to his lips before she was aware of his intention.

“ Mr. Breakspear, you must not do that,” she said in a trembling voice, and hastily withdrawing her hand from his. Her face was pale : a strange look came into her eyes, and she turned and hurried away. Idris, trembling lest he should have given offence, watched her till she was out of sight, and then went slowly back to Wave Crest.

Verily he was a fortunate fellow ! Fresh from a charming *tête-à-tête* with one fair lady he was now to have the like with a second : for, on passing through the garden-gate, he saw Beatrice Ravengar reading in a low chair beneath the apple-trees — Beatrice, the sea-king's daughter, the descendant of that very Viking whose bones reposed in Ormfell !

Her heart beat more quickly as Idris approached. He,

The Viking's Skull

little divining the cause of the colour that played so enchantingly over her cheek, thought Godfrey's sister a very pretty maiden indeed. True, she lacked the dark starry beauty of Lorelie — Idris' tastes ran in favour of brunettes — yet there was a subtle witchery in Beatrice's soft grey eyes and winsome expression ; in her sunny hair : and in her graceful figure, set off as it then was, by a dainty dress of soft muslin.

“ My name, being Breakspear,” said he, with mock sternness, as he took a seat beside her, “ you will not be surprised to learn that I have a lance to break with you.”

“ And what have I done that is amiss ? ” asked Beatrice, outwardly smiling, but inwardly uneasy : for some secret feeling told her that he had just left the presence of Mademoiselle Rivière, and she feared lest that lady should have said something to prejudice her in the eyes of Idris. A fair return, for had not she herself let fall in Idris' presence words unfriendly to Lorelie ?

“ You have committed the sin of omission in not telling me that the armorial shield of the Ravengars is decorated with a silver ring.”

“ I am aware that a ring figures in their coat of arms,” said Beatrice, with wide, wondering eyes, “ but where is my fault in not telling you of it ? Surely,” she added, with a sudden intuition as to his meaning, “ surely you do not mean to say that there is some connection between your runic ring and the Ravengar device ? ”

Idris' reply was to repeat the story he had just heard.

“ This is all new to me,” said Beatrice, when he had finished, “ but then I never was a Ravengar. I am the daughter of my mother, and have taken little, if any, interest in the genealogy and family traditions of my ancestors, the belted earls.”

The Legend of the Runic Ring

“ You should now look with more favour on the Viking’s skull as being that of your great forefather. His object in coming down the staircase last night was evidently to introduce himself to you, his youngest descendant. — But I have interrupted your reading, for which I beg pardon. May I ask the title of your book ? ”

“ Longfellow’s ‘ *Saga of King Olaf.* ’ You have read it ? ”

“ No : but a Norse saga in verse is, by its very nature, certain to interest me. Will you not read aloud, Miss Ravengar ? ”

There is little Beatrice would not have done to please Idris, and accordingly she began the reading of the poem. Her voice was clear and silvery, and marked at times by a cadence, plaintive and pretty. Idris would have fared ill had he been required to give a summary of the poem, for he paid little attention to the words, finding a greater charm in the face and voice of the reader. More than once the thought stole over him that if he had not seen Mademoiselle Rivière his love might have found its resting-place in Beatrice.

Reading smoothly onward Beatrice came to the scene in which the reluctant bride Gudrun, on her wedding-night, draws near to the couch of Olaf, dagger in hand and murder in her heart.

“ ‘ What is that,’ King Olaf said,
‘ Gleams so bright above thy head ?
Wherefore standest thou so white
In pale moonlight ? ’ ”

“ ‘ ’Tis the bodkin that I wear
When at night I bind my hair.’ ”

Beatrice paused. “ Bodkin ? ” she said. “ That’s not the right word. Ladies don’t fasten their hair with bodkins.”

The Viking's Skull

"Poets do not speak with the precision of grammarians. I suppose he should have said hairpin."

"Did they use hairpins in those days, then?"

"Without a doubt," replied Idris, being a little hazy on the point, nevertheless.

"Gudrun must have worn a very large hairpin, if she could liken a dagger to it."

"I suppose it was not very unlike the stiletto contrivances worn by ladies of the present day," answered Idris.

"'Tis the bodkin that I wear
When at night I bind my hair.'"

repeated Beatrice. "At night? Did she wear it in her hair while sleeping?"

"I never knew the lady," laughed Idris, "so I am unable to answer. Why shouldn't she?"

"Because during sleep she might turn her head upon the point and receive an unpleasant stab."

"You speak from experience?"

"An experience as recent only as last night."

"We must leave Gudrun's bodkin suspended in mid-air while you tell me how this happened."

"There is really nothing to tell. When I went to bed I forgot to remove the stiletto from my hair. Somehow, I was unable to sleep last night."

"You were thinking of the skull, perhaps?"

"Yes, it must have been that," replied Beatrice, colouring at this prevarication, for had she spoken truly, she must have told him that *he* was the cause of her unrest.

"And so," she continued, "while I was tossing from side to side, the stiletto must have got loose, and in turning my head on the pillow I received a stab from the point of it. Nothing to speak of, a mere scalp wound."

The Legend of the Runic Ring

"It was well the point was not forced into your brain. I have heard of fatal accidents resulting from the use of these stiletto-pins. You discarded it at once?"

"Of course."

"Forever?"

"O, no. Only till the morning," replied Beatrice demurely.

"What? You have not let it serve as a warning? O, Miss Ravengar, Miss Ravengar! what is this I see shimmering in your hair at the present moment?"

"A proof of feminine vanity, for it is of no real use, being merely an ornament."

"May I inspect the savage weapon that might have ended your existence, and may yet, since you decline to learn wisdom from experience?"

Beatrice drew forth the hairpin. It was shaped like a dagger, the steel being slender, rounded, and tapering to a point: the hilt of gold set with brilliants.

As soon as Idris saw it he stared at it as if mesmerized, the tapering point of the slender steel was so strangely suggestive of the metal fragment that had fallen from the Viking's skull. He took it from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Miss Ravengar, what should you say this is?"

"That?" replied Beatrice. "That is a part of a hairpin. See!"

She laid it upon her open palm beside her own stiletto. The terminal of the latter corresponded exactly in form and colour with the broken fragment: at least, the difference, if difference there were, was imperceptible by the naked eye.

"It certainly *looks* like a hairpin."

"Looks like it, do you say?" said Beatrice, with a sort of reproach in her tone. "It *is*," she asseverated firmly.

The Viking's Skull

"What reason have you for this opinion other than mere resemblance?" asked Idris, a little surprised by her air of certitude.

"I do not reason upon it. I *know* it is a hairpin," she replied, with a peculiar emphasis upon the "know."

There was a strangeness in her manner, an entire reversal of her former self: her face seemed hallowed by a light like the inspired expression of a sibyl. The expression was momentary only, dying as soon as born, but it left Idris curiously impressed.

"Hilda the Alruna may have looked like that, when delivering her oracles," he thought.

"Why do you value this piece of steel?" asked Beatrice, as she restored it to him.

"This little piece of steel, Miss Ravengar, is nothing less than the instrument that gave your ancestor Orm his *coup-de-grâce*. It dropped out of the skull last night. For the future my motto must be, 'When in doubt, consult Miss Ravengar.' By your wit I was enabled to discover the secret entrance to Ormfell; and now, when wondering of what this steel fragment once formed part, you come to my aid again by reading a poem concerning a Norse lady, whose intended action towards her husband seems almost to have a direct bearing upon the Viking's skull. Our Norse forefathers, you will remember, were accustomed to regard their maidens as prophetesses, whose opinions, when solemnly invoked, were to be received as oracles. I will imitate their example, and accept your dictum that this is a fragment of a lady's hairpin."

Godfrey, who had joined the pair a few minutes previously, and had stood a silent listener of the conversation, now intervened with a remark.

"Well, then, you must admit," said he, "that this opinion clashes with the story told by the tapestry, which

The Legend of the Runic Ring

tapestry avers that Orm died with a cloth-yard shaft sticking in him."

"The two ideas are not irreconcilable," argued Idris. "My belief is that we have here," holding up the piece of steel, "a silent testimony to a domestic tragedy of a thousand years ago. Old Orm the Viking was carried from the battle-field wounded by an arrow. His wife Hilda was perhaps enamoured of some other warrior: and so, while affecting to nurse her husband, she may have hastened his end by secretly driving her strong hair-pin into his head, a feat she could perform with comparative safety to herself, there being no coroner's inquest in those days. His death would be attributed to the arrow-wound, and therefore is so represented on the tapestry."

"If your inference be right," said Beatrice, "it is a strange verification of the old saying, 'Murder will out.' Fancy the crime coming to light after the lapse of a thousand years! Though it is not very kind of you, Mr. Breakspear," she added, with a mock pout, "to attempt to prove that my ancestress Hilda was a murderess. You will be saying next that a taste for assassination is one of our family traits, and that the homicidal microbe runs in my blood."

"The lapse of ten centuries will have effectually eliminated it."

"*Merci!*" she returned, dropping him a mock curtsy. "Yes: it is consoling to reflect that this little piece of family scandal is removed from us by the space of a full millennium."

"But Idris is altogether wrong in his theory," remarked Godfrey decisively. "This piece of steel is not ancient at all."

"Ay, ay, destroyer of my romance!" returned Idris. "Can you give me satisfactory proof that it is not ancient?"

The Viking's Skull

"I think so: if you will let me do what I like with it."
Idris shook his head.

"I value this fragment," he explained, "believing in its antiquity. You would not willingly destroy the bullet that killed Nelson, nor will I consent to destroy the weapon that slew my Viking."

"But if I could clearly demonstrate to you that it is a modern piece of steel — what then?"

"In that case it would lose its chief value in my eyes, and it would prove, among other things, that the skull is not Orm's: for if this steel be modern, so likewise must be the skull. But how are you going to prove its modernity? Are not iron and steel alike in all ages? Is the steel that was wrought on the anvil of the Norse armourer different from the steel forged to-day in the foundries of Sheffield?"

"Yes, in some respects. I want to conduct a chemical experiment with this relic, an experiment which will necessitate its destruction. Still, if I succeed in demonstrating its modernity you will not object?"

"Far from it. But are you likely to demonstrate it?"

"Well, of course, I am open to failure. My opinion rests upon a certain assumption, which assumption, if correct, will conclusively show that this steel was forged within modern times. *Nous verrons.*"

CHAPTER XII .

IDRIS DECLARES HIS LOVE

HOW long should a man have known a woman before venturing upon a proposal of love? Such was the question now occupying the mind of Idris.

He had seen Mademoiselle Rivière three times only: he had not spent above seven hours in her presence: yet had they been seven hundred instead of seven he knew that his feeling for her would be no stronger at the end of that time than at the beginning. The moon might have its period of crescent and wane: not so his love: its circle was full and complete from the first moment of his setting eyes upon her.

She was now the sole object of his thoughts. All other matters: the quest for his father, the problem of the Viking's skull, were relegated to the dim and distant future; what were they compared with the winning of Lorelie?

He found himself continually dwelling upon her manner towards him at the moment of their last parting. He was uncertain whether she was startled only, or vexed, by his act of gallantry; whether he must draw hope or despair from that event; and he knew not which was the wiser course — to declare his love at once, or to defer the proposal till he had gained a greater hold upon her affections. A too premature avowal might be disastrous: on the other hand to be dilatory might lead to his being forestalled by Viscount Walden.

This latter argument prevailed with him, and he re-

The Viking's Skull

solved to see Lorelie at once, and take the momentous step of giving utterance to his feelings. Even rejection was preferable to the state of suspense in which he was now living.

On presenting himself at The Cedars he was told by the maid who opened the door that her mistress was out. Where had she gone? The maid was not certain, but she fancied that "Ma'amzelle" had said something about spending the afternoon in Ravenhall Park.

Accordingly Idris betook himself to this park, a large extent of which was open to the public: and after a short search he found Lorelie seated within a charming recess formed by dark rocks overhung with blossoming foliage. She was holding in her hand a small writing-pad, upon which lay some sheets of manuscript that she was apparently correcting and annotating with a pencil, doubtless putting some emendatory touches to her drama, *The Fatal Skull*.

The place, though picturesque, was hardly the ideal spot for his love-avowal, since it was within sight of the majestic towers of Ravenhall, which, in Idris' opinion, offered a very powerful argument in favour of Lord Walden's suit.

On seeing Idris Lorelie at once made way for him on the seat beside her, the glad light in her eyes showing that he was far from being an unwelcome visitor.

Though Idris had set out in bold spirit, yet now, faced by opportunity, he began to realize that the task required more courage than he was master of: and for a long time he talked of other matters, or rather he let Lorelie carry on the conversation, finding it easier to be a listener than a speaker.

And Lorelie *could* talk: charmingly, and upon many topics that are supposed to be the peculiar province of the masculine mind. She had never seemed so bright

Idris Declares His Love

and interesting as on this present occasion. How sweet and silvery her laugh! How pretty the curve of her lips, and how glowing their colour! Supposing he were to stoop suddenly and kiss them? Would not such an act be tantamount to a love-avowal, and thus relieve him from the difficulty of an oral confession?

Lorelie, observant at last of Idris' quiet manner, rallied him on his want of spirits.

"You seem very grave to-day, Mr. Breakspear?"

"Do I, mademoiselle? I am thinking."

"May I share your thoughts?"

"You may share my life if you will."

"Mr. Breakspear, what are you saying?" exclaimed Lorelie, quickly, breathlessly.

"That I love you. Is that a fault? Nay, rather, it would be a fault not to love you."

Lorelie drew a deep shuddering breath. Their eyes met: a strange wistful tenderness in hers. Such a look Idris had never before received from woman: he knew what it meant, and grew giddy at the thought that he had the power to evoke it.

Then, in a moment, all was changed!

A priestess, starting in agony from the Delphic tripod, could not have exhibited a wilder mien than did Lorelie at that moment as she rose to her feet, her hands pressed to her bosom as if to repress the emotion struggling there: in her eyes an expression of horror, the startled guilty look of one who, tempted to listen to wrong, is suddenly recalled to a sense of duty.

Idris had wanted to say more, to speak of the depth of his love, but that look chilled all the warmth of his feelings, and checked the words that were rising to his lips.

"Mr. Breakspear," she began, with a strange "catch" in her voice, "you saved my life from the sea, and it may be that gratitude has led me to — to — how shall I ex-

The Viking's Skull

press myself?—to be too warm in my friendship. I have not guarded myself sufficiently. If there has been anything in my manner or words calculated to impress you with the belief that your addresses would be acceptable to me, I beg—I entreat—of you to forgive me. Such utterance—such action—on my part has been unintentional. I cannot listen to you.”

With many women a “No” may sometimes mean “Yes,” but this was not the case with Lorelie Rivière. Idris felt that her decision was final, irrevocable. And yet what was the meaning of that first look of rapture that had come into her eyes?

“You do well to refuse me, mademoiselle: to refuse in truth any suitor, for who indeed is worthy of you, but——”

“Mr. Breakspear, for pity’s sake be silent. See!”

She drew something from her dress-pocket, turned aside for a moment, and then held out the third finger of her left hand. And at the sight Idris, strong man though he was, staggered as a man may stagger on hearing his death sentence.

“Great heaven! You are not married?” he said hoarsely.

“Ten months ago. Secretly. At Nice.”

“To—to——?”

But he knew the name before she pronounced it.

“To Lord Walden—yes.”

The earth that afternoon was roofed with a sky of deep delicious azure: the soft breeze rippled the leaves of the woodland, and at each breath the air became alive with the white blossoms of the trees. Nothing could be sweeter or fairer than this summer day, but its charm was not for Idris. With the knowledge that Lorelie could never be his, there passed away a glory from the earth.

Mechanically he turned his eyes towards Ravenhall.

Idris Declares His Love

Lorelie followed the direction of his glance. Through a vista in the trees they could see the castellated pile, set with mullioned casements, and fronted with ivied terraces ascended by stately flights of stone steps. She knew — and bitter was the knowledge — that Idris was thinking that *there* was the prize for which she had sold herself.

He wronged her, however, by this thought.

When Lorelie, eighteen months before, had listened to the vows of Viscount Walden she had honestly believed herself to be in love with him. Idris' avowal had shown her the hollowness of that belief. Vivid as fire on a dark night there suddenly flashed upon her trembling mind the overwhelming revelation that her feeling for her husband was as nothing compared with her feeling for Idris. If all the happiness she had previously known had been suddenly sublimated and concentrated into one single intense sensation of a moment's duration it would not have equalled the rapture evoked by Idris' avowal. But in a moment the feeling had gone, giving place to the dull lethargy of despair. Though realizing but too plainly that she had married the wrong man, the knowledge of the fact did not diminish the loyalty due to her husband. Faithful she would ever remain, but it was not her fault if the love that she could henceforth give him would be scarcely deserving of the name.

She would have died rather than have given utterance to this confession, but Idris had read the secret in her eyes: she knew that he had read it, and the knowledge added to her confusion and made her unable to meet his glance.

There was a long silence between them. What was there to talk about? Their mutual love? That was of necessity a forbidden subject; and to talk of anything less than this seemed a mockery of the deep feelings within them.

The Viking's Skull

Parted from Lorelie by adverse fortune what remained for Idris but to face the situation bravely?

"Mademoiselle," he said, using from habit the title that was no longer hers, "I take my leave. Forgive me, if my words have caused you pain. Farewell."

"But not forever. We may meet from time to time as — as friends."

Did she not realize that such friendship might be perilous? No: and as Idris gazed upon her clear eyes he saw there a spirit too pure to suffer itself to do wrong.

"You must forget," she faltered, "that you have ever entertained this — this feeling for me."

Idris smiled bitterly. He knew — *she* knew — that it was the one event in their lives they never would forget.

At their last parting he had kissed her hand: he did not venture even to touch it now, but, lifting his hat, he quietly withdrew.

With tears in her eyes Lorelie watched him till he was lost to view.

"If you knew the truth," she murmured, "your feeling for me would not be love but hatred."

In melancholy mood Idris returned to Wave Crest. Beatrice, quick to interpret his looks, guessed what had happened: and though the result was such as she herself desired, yet the sight of his dejection touched her to the quick and filled her with a mixed feeling of pity and anger. Who, forsooth, was Mademoiselle Rivière that she should treat Idris' love as of no account?

Aware that Lorelie was not favourably regarded by Beatrice Idris had prudently refrained from making the latter a confidante of his love-affair, but now, sitting down beside her, he proceeded to tell her all.

But when Beatrice heard the amazing news that Lorelie Rivière was in reality Viscountess Walden, and therefore

Idris Declares His Love

her cousin by marriage, a look not merely of wonder but of dismay stole over her face.

“Have you proof of this?” she asked breathlessly.

“Proof of what?” exclaimed Godfrey, entering the room at this juncture.

“That Mademoiselle Rivière is Ivar’s wife,” she replied.

“Well, I did not ask her to produce her marriage certificate,” said Idris, somewhat vexed that Lorelie’s word should be doubted. “For the truth of her words I had better refer you to your cousin, Lord Walden himself. We see now the cause of his surliness the other night. Any fellow with so lovely a wife might be jealous on learning that she had spent five hours in a lonely cave *tête-à-tête* with a stranger.”

“He might, nevertheless, have had the grace to give you a few words of thanks for saving her life,” remarked Godfrey. “I suppose it is from fear of his father that he keeps the marriage a secret?”

“Presumably.”

“Hum! rather hazardous to bring her so near to Ravenhall,” said Godfrey.

“And she is really married?” murmured Beatrice. “O, how I have wronged her!”

“In what way?” asked Godfrey. “Come, Trixie, let us learn the reason of your past aversion.”

It was some time before Beatrice could be induced to reply.

“You remember the case of old Gideon?” she said at last.

“Perfectly,” replied Godfrey, adding for Idris’ enlightenment, “he was an old farmer at the point of death. I was unable to procure a nurse, and Trixie generously offered her services. The poor fellow died at midnight; and Trixie, though pressed to remain, left the place and

The Viking's Skull

came walking home all by herself, reaching here at two in the morning. But what has this to do with Mademoiselle Rivière — I beg her pardon, Lady Walden?"

"On my way home," replied Beatrice, "I had to pass her villa, and whom should I see walking up the garden-path towards the house but Ivar himself! He had not noticed me, and I did not make myself known to him: in truth I was so much amazed that I could do nothing but stand silent under the shadow of the trees, watching, or, if you will, playing the spy. I saw him open the door of the villa with a key of his own, and go in. Not knowing that he was married to Mademoiselle Rivière, what conclusion could I come to but that — that ——"

And here Beatrice paused, leaving her hearers to guess the nature of her conclusion.

"And you thought *that* of Mademoiselle Rivière?" said Idris: and Beatrice felt keenly the reproach in his tone.

"I have never whispered my suspicion to any one — not even to you, Godfrey."

"The sequel shows the advantage of holding one's tongue," replied her brother. "It has saved you from having to make a humiliating apology to the new viscountess. Well, seeing that she is now your cousin, you cannot do better than acknowledge the relationship by making a call upon her."

But Beatrice shrank from this ordeal.

"I have always shown her by my manner that I dislike her. She must think me an odious creature."

"On the contrary," replied Idris, "whenever your name has been mentioned she has spoken well of you, and has expressed herself as desirous of your friendship."

Beatrice was finally persuaded into promising that she would pay the new viscountess a visit on the morrow:

Idris Declares His Love

after which, Godfrey, turning to Idris, addressed himself to a new theme.

"I spent this morning," he said, "in my laboratory over that piece of steel taken from your so-called Viking's skull, and I have discovered it to be of modern fabrication."

"Ah! and how do you prove it?" said Idris, preparing to argue the point.

"Chemical analysis shows that the steel contains two per cent. of platinum."

"What of that?" said Idris bluntly.

"Much. Platinum is a metal of modern discovery, first hit on in the year—well, I forget the exact date, some time about the beginning of the eighteenth century. Therefore, any steel that is combined with platinum must have been forged within the past two hundred years, and consequently cannot be a relic of Norse days."

"For what purpose is platinum mixed with the steel?"

"To impart additional hardness."

"I must accept your dictum as final. Of course the conclusion is that if the steel be modern, the skull must be modern, too. I must give up my belief, Miss Raven-gar, that I possess the skull of your Viking ancestor. But then," he went on, "Orm was buried within that hillock: the pictured tapestry and the name Ormfell prove it. What, then, has become of his remains?"

"Crumbled to dust, perhaps, with the lapse of time," suggested Beatrice.

"The existence of the tapestry confutes you. Solid bone would not crumble, if a woollen fabric will endure."

"True," replied Beatrice, with a puzzled look. "I am forgetting the tapestry. Here's a mystery, indeed! What has become of the Viking's bones?"

"If the skeleton within the tumulus be that of a

The Viking's Skull

modern person," said Idris, "how on earth came it there? Who buried him, and——"

"We do not yet know that it is a 'him,'" interjected Godfrey. "The skeleton may be the remains of a woman."

"I speak provisionally. Who buried him, or her, and why should such a strange grave be chosen?"

"Because," replied the surgeon, gravely, "because, my dear Idris, cannot you see that the present occupant of Ormfell did not die a natural death? The piece of steel lodged in the brain proves that. He was murdered, murdered with a stiletto hairpin: and he, or they, that did the deed, knowing, as we know, that Ormfell contains a grave-chamber, disposed of the victim's body by placing it within the hillock, no doubt thinking that the remains, if ever discovered, would be taken for those of some ancient warrior, an error into which we ourselves would have fallen had not that tapestry remained, I might say, providentially remained, to tell us otherwise."

For a few moments both Beatrice and Idris sat dumb-founded at this startling theory.

"By heaven! I believe you are right," cried Idris. "And yet this murder-theory of yours is open to objection. There is the difficulty of conveying a dead body to Ormfell. Consider the risk of detection that the murderer would run."

"The murder may have taken place within Ormfell itself," suggested Beatrice.

"That is my view," replied Godfrey, "for there are signs which seem to point to that conclusion."

"What signs are they?" asked Idris.

"You will perhaps think my first reason fanciful," replied Godfrey. "You have continually maintained," he went on, addressing Idris, "that the divining rod took a downward bend at a certain point in the mortuary cham-

Idris Declares His Love

ber. What formed the attractive force? 'The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground!' Shall we say that that was the true cause? For human blood *has* been shed there. Have you forgotten how the tapestry taken from that very spot reddened the water in which it was placed? Now let us suppose that some one standing at that point was suddenly struck down from behind: his natural action in falling would be to clutch at the nearest thing he could lay hold of."

"Which in his case would be the tapestry," interjected Idris.

"Just so: and that is my way of accounting for the tearing of that fabric, and the downward curvature of the rod to which it was attached. The tapestry at the same time became saturated with the blood of the victim."

"Your opinion seems reasonable," remarked Idris, "except as regards the divining rod; I can't believe that dried blood could produce such an effect. But the difficulty remains—what has become of the Viking's bones?"

And to this question Godfrey could give no satisfactory answer.

"When do you think this murder took place?" Idris asked. "In our own days, or long before them?"

"I see no way at present of fixing the date," Godfrey replied.

"It may have been twenty, fifty, or a hundred years ago, or even more," ventured Idris.

"Any period since the era of the discovery of platinum," answered Godfrey.

"Is there no way in these scientific times of ascertaining the age of that skull?" asked Beatrice.

Godfrey shook his head.

"The most skilled anatomist would be puzzled to determine the age of a given skull," he replied.

The Viking's Skull

Idris paced uneasily to and fro, assigning the skull in turn to each of those who, to his knowledge, had been in any way connected with the runic ring — his father, Lorelie's father, the unknown assassin of Duchesne, and lastly the masked man of Quilaix.

"Whoever the victim was," said Beatrice, slowly and thoughtfully, "he must have been murdered by a woman."

"*A woman!*" ejaculated Idris. He could not tell why at that moment a cold feeling should come over him.

"A woman!" repeated Beatrice, solemnly: "for I still adhere to my belief that the piece of steel was a fragment of a stiletto hairpin, and who but a woman would think of using such an instrument?"

CHAPTER XIII

AT LORELIE'S VILLA

ON the following day Beatrice Ravengar, with some misgivings, set out for the purpose of making an afternoon call upon Mademoiselle Rivière, or, to use her rightful title, Viscountess Walden.

Idris accompanied her, nominally as her escort, in reality consumed with the longing to meet Lorelie again. True wisdom told him that he was but tormenting himself in thus seeing her, that the better way was to avoid her altogether: but he found this latter course impossible: he despised himself for his weakness, yet as the moth is attracted by the light so was Idris attracted by the fascinating personality of Viscountess Walden.

On arriving at The Cedars Beatrice was received in a manner so gracious and winning that her misgivings were immediately put to flight.

"We are cousins, you and I," said Lorelie, kissing her affectionately, "and must ever be good friends."

Beatrice, quick to read character, could tell that the other was really desirous of her friendship: and as she recalled her unjust suspicion she felt full of a guilty shame, and was almost tempted to fall upon her knees, confess her fault, and beg for pardon.

Aware of the circumstances under which Lorelie and Idris had last parted, Beatrice viewed their greeting of each other with an interest that was almost painful to her, and the viscountess knowing that she was watched, extended to Idris the dignified courtesy that she might

The Viking's Skull

have extended to a stranger, though all the time she was inwardly tormented lest Idris should think her unduly cold. None but herself knew how her heart was pulsating beneath her calm exterior. She was not to be blamed, she argued, for the feeling that had sprung up self-originated within her breast. Action and tongue may be controlled: thought never. So long, then, as she controlled her words and action, what more was required of her? What more? A secret voice seemed to say, "Never to see Idris again!"

They sat on the veranda conversing on various topics, and as Beatrice listened to the charming words and the sweet laugh of the viscountess, and contemplated her brilliant beauty, she no longer wondered that Idris should have fallen in love with her.

During the course of the conversation some details of Lorelie's history became revealed.

She was now twenty-three years of age, and had been born at Nantes in the same year in which her father, Captain Rochefort, had aided Eric Marville to escape from the Breton prison. Her father she had never known, nor had he ever been seen again by Madame Rochefort after his flight in the yacht *Nemesis*.

When Lorelie was sixteen years of age her mother died, leaving to her an income sufficient with economy for her maintenance. Henceforward she had led a solitary independent life, content with her books and music. In her twenty-first year she met Lord Walden at Monaco.

They were married privately, and while the earl supposed his son to be carrying on the course of study requisite for the diplomatic profession, that son was in reality quietly celebrating his honeymoon on the Riviera.

After a few months of wedded life Lorelie suddenly conceived the purpose of visiting Ormsby, though her

At Lorelie's Villa

husband was opposed to the idea. By preconcerted arrangement she took up her residence at The Cedars, some weeks prior to Ivar's home-coming, lest their coincident arrival should give rise to suspicion.

And here she remained, concealing her rightful name and rank in compliance with Ivar's wish, and waiting till a favourable opportunity should arrive for making the marriage known to the stern old earl.

Secret contempt stole over Idris at the course pursued by the viscount. A man might be very well content to brave his father's anger and the loss of an estate, however splendid, for such a wife as Lorelie. By some subtle process of telepathy his thoughts communicated themselves to her, and knowing that *he* would not have hesitated at such sacrifice, the viscountess trembled and durst not meet his glance, lest he should read in her eyes more than he ought. Contrary to the proverb the third person on this occasion was not *de trop*. Lorelie felt grateful for the presence of Beatrice, and clung to her as to a protecting angel.

"May I add one to this pleasant trio?" said a new voice, breaking in upon them: and, looking up, Idris caught the suspicious glance of the man whom he was striving not to hate — Lorelie's husband!

Lord Walden coldly acknowledged Idris' presence, smiled at Beatrice, and still keeping up the pretence of being merely a personal friend of Lorelie's, was addressing her as "Mademoiselle Rivière," when Beatrice intervened with, "Why disguise the truth, Cousin Ivar? We know that there is no Mademoiselle Rivière now."

"Ah! then that makes it much more pleasant for all concerned."

But though he spoke thus, there was on his face a look that showed he was not over-pleased to learn that the truth had become known.

The Viking's Skull

"You may rely upon our secrecy," added Beatrice, thinking to put him at his ease.

"I trust so," replied Ivar, coldly.

He took a seat beside Lorelie, and proceeded to roll a cigarette, remarking as he did so, "You do not object?"

Lorelie assented with a smile that evoked the jealousy of the foolish Idris. If a woman may not smile upon her husband, upon whom may she smile?

Concluding that he and Beatrice were better away, Idris now arose, but Lorelie opposed their departure.

"Going after so short a stay?" she remonstrated. "Now you are here you must remain for the evening, and — and Mr. Breakspear as well," she added, glancing at Idris.

Her manner was so persuasive that the two visitors lacked courage to refuse the invitation. Thinking, however, that the viscount and his wife might wish to exchange confidences, Idris offered his arm to Beatrice and invited her to a stroll through the grounds that surrounded the villa.

As Beatrice withdrew leaning on the arm of Idris and blushing at some compliment of his, Lorelie glanced after them with a touch of envy in her eyes. Her days for receiving such attentions were over: her husband had ceased to be her lover. She could not avoid contrasting the appearance of the two men — Ivar's pallid face and languid air with Idris' healthful bronzed complexion and splendid physique. There was a difference of ten years in their ages: and though Ivar was scarcely past twenty, his face bore signs of dissipation — signs which his wife perceived with surprise and sorrow.

No sooner were Idris and Beatrice out of earshot than Ivar turned a frowning countenance upon his wife.

"Why have you told them of our marriage?"

"It was necessary, Ivar."

At Lorelie's Villa

As she recalled the occasion of its disclosure a faint colour tinged her cheek ; and Ivar, though not usually a quick-witted person, immediately suspected the cause.

"Necessitated by that fellow's making love to you, I presume?" he said, eyeing her keenly.

"Ivar," she answered quietly, evading his question, "so long as men think me free——"

"Free! that's a good word."

"So long as I am supposed to be unmarried," she continued, correcting her expression, "so long shall I be liable to receive attentions from other men. You can easily remedy this by making our marriage known."

"O, harping on that string again," said Ivar impatiently. "It's out of the question—at present. The governor would never forgive me for marrying a woman of no family, especially," he added, with something like a sneer, "especially a woman who admits that there is a shadow on her name."

There was a flash of resentment in the eyes that were turned suddenly upon him.

"You can bear me witness it was before our marriage and not after that I confessed to having a secret."

"You would not tell me its nature."

"No: nor ever shall," replied Lorelie, with a hardening of her features. "You were willing to take me as I was, and to ask no questions as to my past. You promised never to refer to my secret. But—how often have you reproached me with it?"

Ivar smoked on in moody silence. It was true he had given no thought to her secret in his first glow of passion. A slave to sensuality he had married Lorelie for her beauty, not knowing who or whence she was, ignorant even that her true name was Rochefort. Now that her beauty was beginning to pall upon him, a fact he took little pains to disguise, this secret that darkened her past

The Viking's Skull

began to trouble him. What answer was he to give to the editors of "Debrett" and "Burke," when interrogated as to his wife's family?

"Ivar," Lorelie continued earnestly, "your visits here are beginning to be noticed. My character is becoming exposed to suspicions. You will let the world know that I am your wife, will you not?"

No true man could have resisted the appealing glance of her eyes, the pleading tone of her soft voice; but Ivar, being no true man, was proof against both.

"Impossible, at present," he frowned. "I have raised you from comparative poverty to affluence; I have surrounded you with luxury, and, by heaven! you little know at what cost, and at what risk to myself! I have made you my wife: be content with that. You will be a countess some day; think of your future triumph over those who slight you now. If people talk, you must put up with it, or go away from Ormsby. It was against my wish that you came here. But your vanity is such that you must feast your eyes daily upon your future heritage of Ravenhall."

"It was neither the desire to see the Ravengar lands, nor the wish even to be near you, that drew me to Ormsby, but a very different motive."

"In the devil's name, what motive?" said Ivar, elevating his eyebrows in surprise.

"It is a part of the secret of my life. But, being here, here I remain. And, Ivar, I must be acknowledged," she added firmly.

"Of course: you are burning to exhibit yourself as Viscountess Walden; to shine in ancestral diamonds; to reign at Ravenhall; to be queen of the county-side; to be courted and admired at fêtes and balls."

"No, Ivar, no; I care nothing for these things, but much for the name of wife. To think that I must plead

At Lorelie's Villa

with my own husband to redeem my name from reproach ! What have you to fear from your father's anger ? As you are his legitimate and only son he cannot deprive you of the title, even if he would ; as to the Ravengar estate, that is entailed, and must therefore descend to you. Of what, then, are you afraid ? ”

“ It is true that the original estate, the estate of the first earl, is entailed ; but since his day the Ravengar lands have more than doubled. These later acquisitions the governor can dispose of as he will. If I offend him he may make them over to some one else, to Beatrice for example, since she is a great favourite of his.”

“ That's a temptation with me to reveal our marriage,” said Lorelie with a smile. “ One half of the Ravengar estate would form a pretty dowry for her and Mr. Breakspear.”

“ Her and Breakspear ? ” Ivar repeated. “ Is it your wish, then, that he should marry Beatrice ? That fellow may have saved your life,” he added darkly, “ but it doesn't follow that you must seek to reward him with the hand of my cousin.”

“ Events are shaping themselves that way,” Lorelie remarked quietly, with a glance at the distant Beatrice, who was laughing gaily while Idris bent over her. “ And really it can be no concern of yours whom she marries.”

“ She is a Ravengar,” replied Ivar, loftily. “ There is the family name to be considered. Pray, who is this insolent Breakspear, that first makes love to you, and now aspires to Beatrice ? ”

“ Mr. Idris Breakspear —— ” began Lorelie, and then she stopped, surprised at the look upon Ivar's face.

“ *Idris !* ” said the viscount quickly. “ Is his name Idris ? ”

“ Yes, why ? ”

The Viking's Skull

“O, nothing. It's an uncommon name, that's all.” With a half-laugh, he added, more to himself than to Lorelie: “Idris Breakspear. Humph! Now if it were Idris Marville!”

It was now Lorelie's turn to be surprised. Till this moment she had been unaware that the name of Idris Marville was known to her husband.

“But, Ivar,” she answered quietly, “Marville, and not Breakspear, happens to be his true name.”

Lord Walden stopped short in his smoking, took the cigarette from his lips, and stared open-mouthed at Lorelie with a look very much like fear upon his face.

“What do you say?” he muttered hoarsely. “Idris Marville. But, bah!” he continued, an expression of relief clearing his features: “that can't be the fellow I have in mind. My Idris Marville died at Paris seven years ago.”

“And so did he—in the newspapers. For a reason of his own he let the world think that he had perished in a hotel-fire.”

At this statement Ivar's agitation became extreme. The cigarette dropped from his fingers; his face became livid.

“Why should his being alive trouble you?” asked Lorelie, looking in wonder at her husband.

For some moments Ivar hesitated, and when at last his answer came, Lorelie intuitively felt that he was not stating the true cause of his disquietude.

“You would marry that fellow to Beatrice?” he said, moistening his dry white lips. “Why he is the son of a—a—felon: his father was tried for murder at Nantes, and found guilty.”

“Have you made a point of studying the bygone criminal trials of France? If not, how have you learned this?”

At Lorelie's Villa

"I heard the story from—from my father," replied Ivar slowly, as if reluctant to make the admission.

At this Lorelie gave a very palpable start. A curious light came into her eyes. She seemed as if struck by some new and surprising idea.

"And how came *he* to learn it?"

"He was in Brittany at the time of the trial, and could not avoid hearing all about it. The crime created, as newspapers say, a great sensation. For weeks the people of Nantes talked of little else."

"Your father's ten years' absence from Ravenhall was spent in Brittany, then?"

"A portion of the time," replied Ivar, evidently uneasy under his wife's catechism.

"And so this murder-trial," observed Lorelie, with a thoughtful air, "this trial which took place so far back as twenty-seven years ago—that is before you and I were born—has formed a topic of conversation between yourself and your father. What necessity led him to talk of the matter to you?"

But Ivar waived this question by asking one.

"What has brought that fellow to Ormsby?" he said, nodding his head in the direction of Idris.

"He is trying to discover his father; for he believes, rightly or wrongly, that Eric Marville is still alive. He has traced him to this neighbourhood," she added, her eyes attentive to every variation in Ivar's countenance.

"And here he may end his quest," said the viscount, "for Eric Marville was shipwrecked off this coast and drowned many years ago. At least, that is my father's statement," he added in some confusion, and looking like a man who has been unwittingly betrayed into a rash statement.

"What was the name of the vessel in which Eric Mar-

The Viking's Skull

ville went down ? ” asked Lorelie, speaking as if she had never before heard of it.

“ *The — The Idris,* ” returned the viscount, giving the name with obvious reluctance.

There was on Lorelie's face a smile that somehow made Ivar feel as if he had walked into a net prepared for him.

“ And how long ago is it since this vessel was wrecked ? ”

“ Twenty-two years ago. ”

“ Twenty-two years ago, ” murmured Lorelie, with the air of one making a mental calculation, “ will take us back to 1876. ”

“ October the thirteenth, 1876, if you wish for the exact date. ”

“ And was it not on this same night of October the thirteenth, 1876, that your father the earl walked into Ravenhall after a mysterious absence of ten years ? ”

“ What of that ? ”

“ O nothing ! Mere coincidence, of course. And so, ” continued Lorelie, with a retrospective air, “ and so the foundering of the yacht *Idris* is another of the little matters about which your father has conversed with you. Strange that a peer of the realm should take such interest in the fate of an escaped felon ! ” She paused, as if expecting Ivar to make some reply, but he did not speak. “ Well, ” she went on, “ I will make the confession that I, too, take an interest — a strong interest — in this Eric Marville ; nay, I will go so far as to say that to discover what ultimately became of him is one of the objects that has led me to Ormsby. And in pursuance of this object I have had the good fortune to obtain from its present editor a copy of *The Ormsby Weekly Times*, dated October 20th, 1876, in which paper there is given an account both of the foundering of the yacht and also of

At Lorelie's Villa

the inquest upon the bodies that were washed ashore. Now, as the coroner was unable to ascertain either the name of the vessel, or the names of any of the men aboard, is it not a little curious that the earl should know that the yacht was called *Idris*, and that it carried on board one Eric Marville? How comes your father to know more than could be elicited in the coroner's court?"

"Egad, you'd better ask him," returned Ivar sullenly.

"Well, I must controvert your father on one point. Eric Marville was *not* drowned. I have proof that he was on shore at the time the yacht sank."

The viscount was obviously startled by this statement.

"Oh! then what became of him?"

"Have I not said that I am trying to find out?"

"You've got a difficult task before you. No one has heard of him since the night of the wreck."

"No one has heard of him by the name Marville, of course. He would not be likely to adhere to a name that would suggest reminiscences of the felon from Valàgenêt. He perhaps resumed his old family name."

"His old family name," repeated Ivar. "What is your reason for supposing that Marville was not his true name?"

"Because it does not appear among the list of names in the peerage."

"The peerage?"

"Do you not know that Marville claimed to be a peer of the realm?"

The viscount smiled, but it was obvious that he was ill at ease.

"Felon in Brittany; peer in Britain. A likely story that! Odd that the detectives and journalists did not discover the fact at the time of his trial."

"It is odd, as you say, Ivar. He certainly kept his

The Viking's Skull

secret well. I do not think he revealed it even to his wife."

"Which proves his lack of a coronet. It is not likely that he would conceal from his wife the fact that he was heir to a peerage."

"He doubtless had his reasons. Having perhaps quarrelled with his family he may have left England forever, determined to begin life anew in another land, and to hide his identity under an assumed name. An imperial archduke of Austria has done the like in our time, and so successfully, too, as to baffle all endeavours to trace him."

"And, pray, to what peerage did this Marville lay claim?"

"I do not know."

"Dormant, or *in esse*?"

"I do not know."

"What was its rank? A baronage: a viscountship: a ——"

"I do not know."

Ivar seemed rather pleased than otherwise with Lorelie's want of knowledge.

"Where, when, and under what circumstances, then, did Eric Marville claim to be a peer?"

"So far as I am aware he referred to it but once, and then to no more than one person, a French military officer, now dead. 'I am heir to a peerage and could take my rank to-morrow, if I chose,' were his words."

"And that's all the evidence you have?"

"All the evidence I have, Ivar."

"Marville was boasting, beyond a doubt. Does that fellow," he continued, glancing at Idris' distant figure, "know of his father's claim to a peerage?"

"He has not the least inkling of it."

"You'll act wisely by keeping the notion out of his pate."

At Lorelie's Villa

“Why so?”

“It's one thing to claim a peerage, but quite another thing to prove one's claim. Why fill the fellow with false hopes? Be guided by me, and refrain from telling him of his father's pretensions.”

“Very well, Ivar,” responded Lorelie, quietly, “I will be guided by you. As your wife it is my duty to do nothing to the detriment of your future interests.”

For a moment the two stared curiously at each other.

“My interests?” muttered the viscount. “I don't understand you.”

“I think you do,” she said gravely. “But,” she added, rising to her feet, “I am neglecting my visitors,” and so saying she moved off in the direction of Idris and Beatrice, who were slowly pacing to and fro on one side of the lawn.

“Not even the coronet to console me now!” she murmured darkly. “A fitting punishment this for my long and guilty silence! Justice, justice, now thy scourge is coming upon me!”

Ivar did not follow his wife, but sat motionless for some moments, staring after her in blank dismay, and completely confounded by the startling hints that she had let fall.

“Idris Marville not dead,” he muttered, removing with his handkerchief the cold moisture that glistened on his forehead. “That fellow he! Living here at Ormsby — in the same house with Beatrice! And Lorelie suspects! Suspects? She *knows*. By God! supposing she tells him! But, bah! she will not — she dare not — declare it; she stands to lose too much.” He recalled her words to the effect that she would do nothing detrimental to his interests. The meaning of this assurance was obvious, and Ivar breathed more freely. “She'll keep the secret for her own sake. She'll not be so mad as to cut her own

The Viking's Skull

throat. In marrying her I've stopped her mouth. But if she had known as much a year ago as she knows to-day ——!"

The smile had returned to Lorelie's lips by the time she reached Idris and Beatrice, and at her invitation they repaired to the drawing-room. Lord Walden, with a black feeling of hatred in his heart against both his wife and Idris, slowly followed without speaking, and flung himself on a distant ottoman as if desiring no companionship but his own.

Idris, thus ignored by the viscount, could but ignore him in turn. He had never beheld a more sullen and a more ungracious clown than Lorelie's husband, and he much regretted that he had not followed his first impulse to depart.

The drawing-room was a handsome apartment, containing many evidences of taste and wealth. Lorelie took a pride in pointing out her treasures.

"My father," she remarked, observing Beatrice's eyes set upon a portrait in oils representing a handsome man in the uniform of a French military officer.

Idris viewed with interest the likeness of the man who for about the space of a minute had flashed across his childhood's days.

"A man who will ever command my respect," he murmured, "since in rescuing my father from prison he was forced by that act to become an exile from his native land."

An expression of pain passed over Lorelie's face.

"Mr. Breakspear, you do not know what you are saying."

"Forgive me. I promised never to allude to that event, and I am breaking my word. I apologize."

And he wondered, as he had often wondered, why reference to this matter should trouble her. She had no

At Lorelie's Villa

cause to be ashamed of her father's deed. Captain Rochefort's act in favour of a friend whom he believed to be innocent was, from Idris' point of view, a gallant and romantic enterprise, and in the judgment of most persons would deserve condonation, if not approval.

After the portrait of Captain Rochefort, what most interested Beatrice was an antique vase standing upon the carved mantel. It was of gold, set with precious stones, and the interior was concealed from view by a tight-fitting lid.

"What a pretty vase!" she said, and with Lorelie's sanction she lifted it from the mantel. As she did so a cold tremor passed over her. She placed the urn upon the table, and in a moment the feeling was gone. She took up the vase again, and the unpleasant sensation returned. Was this due to something exhaled from the interior of the urn? She drew a deep breath through her nostrils, but failed to detect any odour.

Puzzled and annoyed, Beatrice became morbidly curious to learn its contents.

"The lid fits very tightly," she said, addressing Lorelie. "How do you remove it?"

"It is secured by a hidden spring," replied the viscountess. "If you can discover the secret, you will be doing me a favour, for I have never been able to open it myself."

"Then you do not know what treasure it may contain," smiled Beatrice. "Attar of roses, spices from Arabia, pearls from the Orient, may lurk within." She shook the urn, and a faint sound accompanied the movement. "Listen! there is certainly something inside."

"I am full of curiosity myself to know what it is," said Lorelie, "I have spent hours in trying to discover the spring."

"Then it is useless for me to try."

The Viking's Skull

But though Beatrice spoke thus, she nevertheless made the attempt, toying with the vase and pressing various figures sculptured upon the sides. All to no purpose. The jewels sparkled like wicked eyes, seeming to mock her endeavours. The sound caused by the shaking of the urn was like the collision of paper pellets, shavings of wood, or of some other substance equally light. And all the time while handling the vase Beatrice was conscious of a strange feeling of repulsion. What caused it she could not tell: the fact was certain: the reason inexplicable.

“Is this vase an heirloom?” she asked, desirous of learning whence Lorelie had obtained it, and yet not liking to appear too curious.

The viscountess hesitated a moment, evidently adverse to replying, and then stooped over Beatrice and kissed her.

“Will you think me discourteous, Beatrice, if—if I do not tell you how I came by it?”

While speaking she glanced aside at Ivar who, from his position on the couch, was watching the scene with so perturbed an air that Idris was led to believe there was some strange secret connected with this vase—a secret known to both husband and wife. Great as was his love for Lorelie, Idris was compelled to admit that she was very mysterious in some of her ways.

Then a strange thing happened.

Idris, keenly attentive to all that was passing, observed a curious expression stealing over Beatrice's face. Once before he had seen this expression, namely, at the time when she gave her opinion on the piece of steel taken from the Viking's skull. The pupils of her eyes were contracted, and set with a bright fixity of gaze upon the jewelled urn. The rigidity of her figure indicated a cataleptic state.

At Lorelie's Villa

Her lips parted, and in a voice strangely unlike her own, she said:—

“The ashes of the dead!”

At this Lorelie gave a faint cry and drew away the vase, glancing again at Ivar. Then, with her hands she closed the eyes of Beatrice, and shook her gently. Beatrice opened her eyes again, and looked around with the surprised air of one aroused suddenly from sleep.

“Do you know what you have been saying?” Lorelie asked.

“No — what?”

“That this is a funereal urn.”

“Have I been self-hypnotized again?”

“Again?” repeated Lorelie. “Do you often fall into this state?”

“Occasionally — when gazing too long at some bright object: and then the object seems to whisper its history to me, or rather, as Godfrey more sensibly remarks, my mind begins to weave all kinds of fancies around it.”

“Why, you must be a clairvoyante,” said Lorelie, studying the other intently. “‘The ashes of the dead?’ Yes, this may be a crematory vase. What do you say, Ivar?” she added, turning to the viscount.

“Of course Beatrice knows,” was his reply, “for is she not a daughter of the gods, a descendant of a Norse prophetess? But, Beatrice, I think that the blood of Hilda the Alruna must have become so diluted during the course of ten centuries that your claim to the hereditary gift of intuition is a little laughable.”

“I am not aware of having made any such claim,” replied Beatrice, quietly.

“And such claim, if made, would be justified,” retorted Idris, roused by Lord Walden's sneering air, “for Miss Ravengar has given me previous proof of possessing remarkable intuitive powers.”

The Viking's Skull

"Let us say no more on the matter," said Lorelie, gently.

She restored the urn to its place on the mantelpiece, and, desirous of removing the somewhat unpleasant impression created by the incident, immediately started a conversation on other topics.

The talk turned presently upon literature, and Idris, remembering that Lorelie was an author, said:—

"Lady Walden, will you not give us a reading from your play?"

"O, yes, do!" cried Beatrice, impulsively.

Lorelie hesitated. The drama written by her had been a work of time and patience: it was as near perfection as she would ever be able to bring it: she had poured her noblest feelings into the work. But she knew that what seems good to the author often seems bad to the critic: that the thoughts, supposed to be original, prove to be merely echoes of what others have said before in far better language: that the line that separates eloquence from bombast is easily passable on the wrong side.

These were the motives disposing Lorelie to keep her tragedy to herself. The person who should have been the first to give encouragement on this occasion was mute; for Ivar maintained an air of indifference.

"Deserves kicking," was Idris' secret comment, as he became conscious of a suggestion of humiliation in Lorelie's manner, due to her husband's want of appreciation. "And," he added to himself, "I should very much like to do the kicking."

Moved at last by the solicitations of her two visitors Lorelie produced the manuscript of her play and prepared to read some portions of it.

"This drama of mine, '*The Fatal Skull*,'" she began, "derives its name from the central incident in it — an incident of early Italian history. Alboin, King of the Lom-

At Lorelie's Villa

bards, had become enamoured of Rosamond, the beautiful daughter of Cunimund, King of the Gepids. Both father and daughter, however, rejected the suit, for Lombards and Gepids had long been at feud. Embassies having failed, Alboin resolved to attain his object by force, and, accordingly, entered the territories of Cunimund with an army. In the battle that followed, the Gepid king was slain, his forces put to the rout, and his daughter Rosamond became the prize and the reluctant bride of the conqueror Alboin."

"How dreadful," murmured Beatrice, "to be compelled to marry the man who had slain her father!"

"The sequel is more dreadful," returned Lorelie. "The death of Cunimund was not sufficient to satiate the hatred of Alboin; the skull of the fallen king, fashioned into a drinking cup, became the most treasured ornament of his sideboard.

"Feasting one day with his companions-in-arms, Alboin called for the skull of Cunimund. 'The cup of victory' — to quote the words of Gibbon — 'was accepted with horrid applause by the circle of the Lombard chiefs. 'Fill it again with wine,' exclaimed the inhuman conqueror, 'fill it to the brim; carry this goblet to the queen, and request in my name that she would rejoice with her father.' In an agony of grief and rage, Rosamond had strength to utter, 'Let the will of my lord be obeyed,' and, touching it with her lips, pronounced a silent imprecation that the insult should be washed away in the blood of Alboin.'"

"And did she kill her husband?" asked Beatrice.

"Yes, with the help of his armour-bearer Helmichis."

Having thus set forth the argument, Lorelie, unfolding her manuscript, began to read certain scenes from her play. The reading of them was a revelation both to Idris and Beatrice: there was a masculine vigour in the lines:

The Viking's Skull

the thoughts were as noble as they were original, and graced by many poetic images and by passages of exquisite beauty.

Charmed by the melody of Lorelie's voice, charmed still more by the lovely face set in a frame of dark hair, Idris sat entranced, with something more than admiration in his eyes. And as Beatrice observed his rapt attitude, his accelerated breathing, she trembled uneasily; not for herself, but for Lorelie. In the near future, when the young viscountess should have come to learn the worthlessness of her husband, and to experience the misery of existence with him, would she have sufficient strength and purity of soul to resist the temptation of flying to the arms of Idris? Their meeting with each other was a foolish playing with fire, and could have but one ending. Beatrice ceased to listen to the reading of the play, and grew miserable with her own thoughts.

"Lady Walden," said Idris, when she had finished her recital, "your drama is a work of real genius."

His praise was sweeter to Lorelie than the praise of a thousand other critics, and her cheek flushed with triumph.

"You certainly ought to have it put upon the stage," he continued.

"Yes," chimed in Ivar: for even *his* sullen nature had been moved to admiration: "you must not hide your light under a bushel. If one is a genius, let the world know it."

"If this play should ever be acted," said Lorelie, "then let *me* take the chief part in it. Who more fit to play the rôle of Rosamond than the creator of Rosamond?"

"Well, whenever you desire to begin rehearsals," said Idris, jocularly, "Miss Ravengar can supply you with one item of stage property in the shape of a real skull."

At Lorelie's Villa

"But you would not drink from a real skull?" said Beatrice.

"It would add to the effect," smiled Lorelie.

"Drink from a real skull? Ah, how horrid!" exclaimed Beatrice.

In reciting the words of the wronged and indignant Queen, Lorelie had caught the genuine spirit of the character: and now, inspired by the idea of becoming its exponent upon the stage, she rose to her feet, her eyes sparkling as with the light of future triumph.

As she stood upon the hearth in statuesque pose, she seemed to be the very queen of tragedy, to be breathing, as it were, the air of vengeance; a spirit so contrary to her usual sweet self that Idris did not like to witness its assumption, however suitable it may have been to the character of the fierce Rosamond.

"I can see the eyes of the theatre riveted upon me," she murmured, picturing to herself the future representation of her drama, "as I enter the banqueting-hall of the Lombard chiefs, and advance to drink from the fatal cup! How the audience will thrill as they watch! How awful the silence as Rosamond places her lips to her father's skull!"

She illustrated her words by taking the antique vase from the mantel and going through the action of drinking from it, shuddering as she did so; though whether her shudder was mere simulation, or a real thing occasioned by the supposed nature of its contents was more than Idris could tell.

"And when the hour for vengeance came, I would rise to the height of the occasion, and strike down Alboin — *so!*"

Drawing from her hair a long and gleaming hairpin shaped like a stiletto, she went through the motion of stabbing an imaginary figure.

The Viking's Skull

“‘Die!’” she exclaimed, in an exultant tone, and quoting the words of her play. “‘This Rosamond sends.’”

There was a weird roll of her glittering eyes as she flung out her left hand tightly clenched: a swiftness and ferocity in the downward stroke of the stiletto in her right, so suggestive of real murder that Idris glanced at her feet, almost expecting to see a human figure lying there.

Beatrice gave a cry of genuine terror. Ivar looked on with evident admiration.

For a few seconds Lorelie maintained a rigid bending pose, her eyes dilated with terror, staring at the hearth as if she beheld something there. Then, with a motion startling in its suddenness, she recovered her erect attitude, and reeled backward with her lifted hand clenched upon her brow. The stiletto dropped from her limp fingers, and the peculiar ringing sound produced by its contact with the tiled hearth was fresh in Idris' ears for many days afterwards.

“‘A-a-ah!’” she cried in a long-drawn thrilling sibilant whisper, which, nevertheless, penetrated to every corner of the apartment, and again quoting from her play. “‘Ah! He moves! His eyes open! That look of reproach! I dare not,’” she went on, gasping for breath, “‘I dare not strike again! Helmichis, do thou strike for me.’”

With averted face she staggered back and dropped upon a couch, apparently exhausted by real or simulated emotion.

“Bravo! bravo!” cried Ivar, clapping his hands. “The divine Sarah couldn't do it better. By heaven! we ought to have this play staged, with you in the *rôle* of Rosamond. You'd be the talk of London.”

As for Idris, the *diablerie* of Lorelie's manner had given him a sensation very much akin to horror.

At Lorelie's Villa

"What have I been witnessing?" he murmured. "A piece of acting merely, or a reminiscence of a real tragedy?"

Beatrice, deadly white, and with her eyes closed, lay back upon an ottoman silent and motionless.

"What do you say?" said Lorelie, coming quickly forward in response to a remark from Idris.

"I think Miss Ravengar has fainted," he repeated.

"Egad! Lorelie," said Ivar, amused. "There's a tribute to your acting, if you like."

Lady Walden instantly busied herself in applying restoratives to the swooning Beatrice.

"I am sorry to have frightened you," she said in gentle tones to Beatrice when the latter had recovered. "It was very absurd of me to act so."

But Lorelie's tenderness met with no response from Beatrice, whose eyes were full of a wild haunting horror. She shrank from Lorelie's touch; she avoided her glance; her whole manner showed that she was anxious for nothing so much as to get away from her presence.

"I—I think I'll go home now," she said, glancing at Idris. "Godfrey will be waiting for us. We promised to return early."

"The walk through the fresh air will do you good," remarked Idris, who was himself desirous of withdrawing.

It was in vain that Lorelie pressed her visitors to stay. Beatrice declared that she must go, and within the space of a few minutes she had taken a very abrupt leave of her hostess.

That night Idris' sleep was broken by troubled dreams, in all of which a woman's image mingled, always in the act of striking down some shadowy foe; but the venue was changed from the elegant apartment at The Cedars to the grey stone interior of Ormfell!

CHAPTER XIV

TOLD BY THE VASE

NEXT morning Idris strove to put aside the fear that had found expression in his dreams, but the dark idea would persist in forcing itself upon him. He grew angry with himself. Heavens! was he not master of his own mind that he could not throw off this suspicion of the woman whom he loved? Strange and mysterious Lorelie might be, but that she was a taker of human life he found it impossible to believe.

Doubtless it was true that a murder had taken place within Ormfell, but that the crime had been wrought by a stiletto hairpin was merely a conjecture on the part of Beatrice, who had no valid reason to offer in support of her theory: yet, imbued with this fancy she was persistent in maintaining that a woman must have been the author of the deed.

Assuming it, however, to be a fact that the piece of steel was a fragment of a hairpin, and the person who used it as an instrument of death a woman, it did not follow because Lorelie had drawn a stiletto pin from her hair in order to illustrate an assassination-scene in her play, that he must identify her with the guilty woman.

There was not only no evidence to connect Lorelie with the crime, but much to prove the contrary. For instance, it requires a very long period of time before a human body will become reduced to the state of a skeleton such as that which Idris and Godfrey had found in the interior of the ancient tumulus.

But Lorelie's coming to Ormsby had taken place less

Told by the Vase

than five months ago. Therefore, unless the remains had been brought from elsewhere, she could have had no hand in the crime.

But had the remains been brought from elsewhere? and was Godfrey wrong in limiting the scene of the murder to the interior of Ormfell? With a sudden thrill of surprise and fear Idris recalled the reliquary brought to Ravenhall by Ivar on the night of his return from the continent. The story of the viscount's midnight visit to the vault had been told him in confidence by Godfrey, and Idris therefore knew that this mysterious visit had some connection with Lorelie's affairs. The meaning of it all had completely puzzled the two friends; but now, while pondering over Ivar's action, Idris felt a return of all his misgivings.

Oblivious of the flight of time he remained on his pillow occupied in gloomy thought, and when at last he did get up and go down-stairs, he found that he must breakfast alone, for Beatrice was absent, having left a message with the maid to the effect that she had gone to The Cedars.

The Cedars of all places! How came it that Beatrice, after having evinced such fear of Lorelie on the previous evening, should repair thither the next morning? Was it to tell Lorelie of her suspicions? to warn her that the crime was known? to put her on her guard?

Some such motive must have actuated her: so Idris, thinking that he could not do better than imitate her example, set off himself in the direction of The Cedars.

On his arrival he learned from the maid who opened the door that Beatrice was in the drawing-room with Lorelie.

“Let me see them, please.”

Without ascertaining whether his presence would be acceptable to her mistress, the girl ushered him into

The Viking's Skull

the drawing-room with the words, "Mr. Breakspear, ma'amzelle," and there left him.

Idris looked around. No one was visible, but from the other side of the curtains that draped one end of the room came the sound of voices. The maid in introducing him had pronounced his name so softly that apparently those behind the portière were unaware of his presence.

The two curtains forming the portière not being closely drawn left an opening, through which Idris, as he went forward, caught a glimpse of a small boudoir. Both Lorelie and Beatrice were there.

On the point of addressing them, he was suddenly stopped in his purpose by something odd in the appearance and attitude of each.

Beatrice occupied a position at a low table, upon which stood the vase that had attracted her curiosity on the previous day, the vase containing "the ashes of the dead."

She sat erect and silent, her hands resting on her lap, her face as rigid as if sculptured from marble: her attitude gave an impression that if pushed she would fall over like a dead weight. Her eyes were set upon the glittering vase with a curious far-off expression in them, as if observant of some scene a thousand miles away.

Facing her a few paces off, with her eyes concentrating all their brightness and force upon Beatrice's face, sat Lady Walden. It was clear at a glance that she held Beatrice's mind and will completely under her own control.

"As I live," murmured Idris, "she has hypnotized Beatrice. She is going to conduct some experiment with the vase."

Having an honourable man's aversion to play the spy he was about to make his presence known, when, sud-

Told by the Vase

denly, checked by some motive for which he could not account, he determined to remain an unseen watcher.

Lorelie rose and placed Beatrice's hands upon the vase, where they rested, passive and limp. This movement was accompanied by a shiver on the part of the medium. If the soul be capable of abstraction from the body, Idris might have believed that Beatrice's soul had left her at that moment to animate the vase, for the urn seemed to become instinct with motion, and to sparkle with a new light.

"Speak, Beatrice," said Lorelie in a solemn tone. "Speak from the depth of this vase: listen to the voice of its quivering atoms: recall from it the scenes and sounds of the past.—Tell me, what do you feel—hear—see?"

A hollow voice arose, a voice that sounded like a mockery of Beatrice's tones: and although her lips moved, the words seemed to emanate, not from her, but from the urn.

"It is dark . . . very dark . . . nothing can be seen . . . No sun . . . no stars . . . no light . . . All is cold . . . and damp . . . and still . . . There is no air . . . or wind . . . no life . . . or motion . . . It is like the grave . . . Above, beneath, on all sides, the earth presses . . . Always the earth around . . . nothing but earth . . . For ages and ages, deep down in the ground."

She repeated this last sentence several times.

"For ages and ages, deep down in the ground."

"What next?" asked Lorelie.

"A sound . . . faint . . . far-off . . . Now it comes nearer . . . it is as of a spade digging . . . it is coming down . . . down . . . down . . . The earth above loosens . . .

The Viking's Skull

disappears . . . The blowing of fresh air . . .
the gleam of daylight . . . Now the blue sky looks
down . . . Lifted up by strong hands to the glorious
sunshine above . . . It is the edge of a pit . . .
Small pieces of gold mixed with earth lie about . . .
It is spring-time . . . The air is full of the sound
of falling waters . . . There are green hills around,
dark here and there with pines and firs . . . Above
them snow shining in the sun . . . There are men
about . . . digging . . . men with deep blue
eyes and flaxen hair . . . They wear close-fitting
tunics . . . Their legs are bare, crossed by thongs
of leather, . . . They talk a strange language
. . . Now they stop digging . . . laugh . . .
and drink mead from ox-horns."

Idris started, beginning to detect a glimmer of meaning
in these utterances, hitherto as dark as a Delphic oracle.

"It is hot . . . very hot . . . There is a
fire . . . flames playing in golden and ruddy hues
on the rafters above . . . Many pieces of metal are
stacked upon the shelves around . . . Shields,
spears, swords, all newly-wrought, are lying about . . .
The clangour of the anvil arises . . . The red sparks
fly around . . . Men are moving to and fro, all
busy . . . One is pouring molten metal into a clay
mould . . . It is liquid, glowing gold . . . He
is casting a vase . . . a funeral urn . . . *this!*"

Idris had heard something of the marvels of clairvoyance,
but clairvoyance like this fairly took his breath
away. It was clear that Beatrice was giving the whole
history of the vase, from the time when the metal com-
posing it first issued from the earth in the shape of ore in
the old Norse fatherland!

"It is a long, low, wooden hall. The lady is beautiful,
with dark eyes and raven hair. There are some

Told by the Vase

maidens around. They are at needlework. They have one long piece of cloth on their knees, and are sewing different coloured threads into it. The lady directs them. Now she moves towards the bed. There is some one lying on it, hidden by a bearskin. At the head is the golden vase. The lady lifts the coverlet. Beneath, there reposes a dead man, with yellow hair and beard. He lies upon his shield, his spear and sword beside him. The lady falls across the body weeping."

This scene was clear enough to Idris' comprehension. The dark-haired lady was the ancestress of Beatrice herself, Hilda the Alruna, mourning the death of her husband, Orm the Viking: and the maidens were the captive nuns who had wrought the figured tapestry that had decorated the interior of Ormfell.

"The maidens tremble as the stern-faced warriors enter the hall to carry away the body of their chief. He is borne aloft to the place of sepulture upon his brazen shield. The lady follows, clasping the urn to her bosom."

Beatrice paused for a moment, and then began another picture.

"The green hill-tomb rises high in sunny air, and close by murmurs the voice of the restless sea. The dead warrior is laid upon an altar of wood. Many persons stand around. A fair-haired boy touches the pile with a flaming torch. As he does so, a shout goes up to the sky."

Though Beatrice's utterances were not marked by any rhythmic measure, she nevertheless began to intone them to an air, which Idris immediately recognized as the Ravengar Funeral March, the requiem that had made so strange an impression upon him when played by Lorelie upon the organ of St. Oswald's Church.

"See the gleam of lifted lance and shield! Hark to

The Viking's Skull

the wailing of the women, as they beat their breasts and rend their tresses for the death of their great chief! List to the warriors, as they clash their brazen bucklers with clanging sword-strokes! Now rises the wild barbaric song of the long-haired scald, hymning to his harp the heroic deeds of the dead, and chanting the dirge that shall never be forgotten by the Raven-race. Upward mount the flames of the pyre. See how the maddened raven, tied to the fagot with silken thread, flaps his wings and screams with terror, pecking at the bond that holds him. The volumed smoke hides him from view: the fire severs the thread: now he soars heavenward, bearing the soul of the warrior to Valhalla. The fire burns long, glowing in the breath of the breeze. Now it fades: glimmers: and dies out. The lady draws near with the urn: within it are reverently placed the ashes of the dead."

Beatrice ceased her intonation, and continued in a quieter tone.

"It is a square place, built of stone. Men are moving about. Some carry torches. Others are decking the walls with tapestry, hanging it from a metal rod. There is a stone receptacle in the centre. The dark-haired lady places the urn within this, and retires. The lights vanish. All is silence and darkness — silence and darkness."

It was clear that Beatrice had been describing the incidents attending the death and burial of Orm. Her account had cleared up one mystery. The contents of the urn were nothing less than the ashes of the old Viking, the ancestral dust from which Beatrice herself had sprung! This completely answered the question as to what had become of his remains, and furnished additional proof that the skeleton in the sarcophagus was not that of Orm.

Told by the Vase

But here a disquieting thought presented itself. Who had removed this urn from the tomb in Ormfell, and in what way had Lorelie become possessed of it? He dismissed the question for the moment in order to listen to Beatrice who was speaking again.

“Footsteps round about. Light shines through the interstices of the tomb. Some one is speaking. It is the dark-haired lady. There is a man with her. They take off the lid of the tomb and put in all kinds of bright things — coins and rings : gold and silver ingots : cups, lamps, precious stones, and the like. They sparkle in the light. The tomb is full. They lay the rest on the floor. Now they steal away. The light goes with them. Silence and darkness again.”

Thus far Beatrice's monologue had dealt with a period of history distant by a thousand years, and had told Idris little that he did not already know. Would she continue the story of the urn through the succeeding centuries? Would she reach modern times, and speak of those who had removed the treasure? would she describe the murder that had taken place, and tell how the urn came to be in Lorelie's possession?

Spellbound he waited for the sequel. If any one had told him that the Viking's treasure was lying upon the roadway outside to be his own for the mere trouble of walking thither, he would not have stirred from his position.

Beatrice had been silent for some time, when Lorelie, speaking in the same tone of authority that she had used throughout, said:—

“What comes next?”

“The dropping of moisture from the roof.”

“What next?”

“Silence and darkness.”

Idris began to think that he was doomed to disappoint-

The Viking's Skull

ment. Each scene described by Beatrice had been followed by an interval, sometimes long, sometimes short, apparently proportionate to the actual length of time that had elapsed between each event. How many minutes were to serve as a measure of the space that separated the age of Orm from the date of the removal of the treasure? Not so many, he trusted, as to cause Lorelie to bring her experiment to a close.

“How much time is passing?”

“Centuries — long centuries — centuries of silence and darkness.”

For a long time Beatrice continued to sit without speaking. At length, to Idris' satisfaction, she resumed her monologue.

“A muffled noise like a spade digging. The falling of earth. Some one is going to enter.”

“Is this person the first to enter the hillock since the days of the dark-haired lady?”

“The very first.—Cool air blows down the passage, filling the chamber with its freshness. It penetrates the chinks of the tomb.”

“Are there several men, or only one?”

“One only.”

“What is he doing?”

“He waits a long time at the entrance. Now he comes forward along the passage. He carries a light: it gleams through the interstices of the tomb. He walks about, his feet striking against pieces of metal. He seems to be picking up some. Now, with a cry, he drops them. They ring on the hard earth. There are fresh footsteps coming along the passage. Coming quickly, too!”

Beatrice's voice had lost some of its cold ring: she seemed to be less of an automaton and more of a living woman, capable of being moved by what she saw and

Told by the Vase

heard. Idris did not fail to notice the change. It was an agreeable change, but ominous for his hopes. She seemed to be emerging from her trance: emerging, too, at a very significant point of the story.

He noticed, too, that Lorelie's interest had kept pace with his own: there was on her face a look of painful anxiety that had been entirely absent in the earlier stages of the experiment.

"A second man has entered the place. There is a silence. They seem to be standing still, looking at each other. Now they walk to and fro speaking."

"What do they say?"

"Their voices are hushed! Ha! A sound like the tearing of cloth. The dull thud as of a body falling to the earth. A gasp, and all is still. The footsteps move about again. It seems as if only one man is there. He comes slowly forward and approaches the tomb. He places the light upon the floor. He is going to lift the lid. It is heavy. He can scarcely move it. He pushes it aside with his hands. Ah!" she exclaimed in a tone of disgust, "ah! his fingers are wet with blood. Some drops fall into the tomb. Oh!" she gasped in the voice of one who suddenly realizes an awful truth. "Oh! he is a murderer! He has killed the other. He peers into the tomb. The lamp on the floor lights up his face. I can see the sparkle of his eyes. *Oh! it is ——*"

In sheer horror Beatrice paused as if recognizing the visionary face.

"What! You know him," cried Lorelie, wildly: and to Idris' mind there was as much horror in her voice as in that of Beatrice. "You know him? Who is it?"

Instead of replying Beatrice tried to lift her hands as though their removal from the vase would dissolve the

The Viking's Skull

terrible vision. Lorelie came swiftly forward and stayed her action with an imperative gesture.

Much as Idris felt the necessity for intervention, he refrained, for he was as eager for the name as Lorelie herself.

"You recognize him?" cried Lorelie. "Who is it? His name? Who has more right to know it than I? Speak! God of heaven, I'll wrest the name from you, though you were dying—— No! stop! silence!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Do not say the name."

Eager to learn the secret Idris had been incautiously pressing against the silken portière, and even in the midst of her agitation, Lorelie had seen the movement of the curtain.

There was a moment's silence, and then she cried:—

"Who is there?"

"A friend," replied Idris: and seeing that he was discovered he lifted the curtain and entered the recess. "Let us have the name, and then——"

"It was honourable of you to play the spy!" said Lorelie, coldly: and Idris could not help feeling that he deserved the reproach.

"Miss Ravengar," he said, stepping up to Beatrice and taking both her hands in his own: "tell me whose face you see peering into the tomb."

"A face peering into the tomb? I—I don't understand."

Beatrice's voice had assumed its sweet natural ring. From her low seat she looked up at Idris with the light of gladness in her eyes at seeing him, a colour on her cheek at finding her hands clasped in his.

For a moment he eyed her keenly, thinking that in order to shield the guilty person she was going to deny the recognition. Then the truth flashed upon him. She had emerged from her hypnotic trance. On detecting his

Told by the Vase

presence the viscountess by some quick sleight of hand must have restored her to her normal state of mind.

Beatrice's wondering eyes showed that she was entirely ignorant of the story that had flowed from her lips.

That story had accomplished one good end. She had spoken of the assassin as a man, and a weight was lifted from Idris' mind. Thank heaven, Lorelie was not the author of the deed! But a troubling thought remained. Was she a friend of the assassin, an accessory after the fact? If not, why was she so anxious to conceal his name?

A question or two on the part of Idris elicited the fact that it was Beatrice herself who had suggested the experiment with the vase. Lorelie, who was versed in the art of hypnotism, had readily assented, being as eager as Beatrice to learn its secret.

And now that the experiment was over Beatrice looked from Lorelie to Idris, and from Idris to Lorelie, wondering why each seemed so grave.

"What have I been saying?" she asked.

Lorelie turned to Idris. "How long have you been here?"

"From the beginning of your experiment," he answered.

"Then Beatrice shall learn the story from you."

"But the story lacks completion. You left the experiment unfinished at its most interesting point.—Lady Walden," continued Idris, gravely, "you know now, if you did not know before, that a murder was committed within the interior of Ormfell. Justice requires that the murderer should be punished."

"Go on," she murmured, as he paused.

"That urn," he continued, pointing to the golden vase, "formed a part of the treasure that led to the crime.

The Viking's Skull

Whoever gave you the urn was either the assassin, or obtained it through the agency of the assassin."

Idris paused again, and Lorelie herself uttered the question that was in his mind.

"And, therefore, you would learn the name of the giver?"

Idris bowed.

"Mr. Breakspear, you ask too much."

"You desire to shield a murderer?"

"That is nothing new — with me. I have been doing that for many years."

No look could be more mournful than that accompanying her words.

"You will not give me the name that was trembling upon the lips of Miss Ravengar?"

"I did not hear it," replied Lorelie, evasively.

"But you have formed a suspicion?"

"My suspicions might compromise the innocent, even as I myself have been compromised," she added, with a reproachful glance at Beatrice.

"Forgive me," murmured Beatrice, with drooping eyes.

"Are we not all liable to error?" said Lorelie, kissing her tenderly. "I commend your frankness in coming to state your suspicions, painful though it was for me to listen. No; though fallen from what I might be, I have not yet stooped to murder." And then, turning to Idris, she said:—

"If I refuse your request I do so in order that I may not rashly accuse the innocent. When I have verified my suspicions, you shall know the truth: for, if I am not mistaken, no one will have more right to the knowledge than yourself. And then," she added, with a melancholy smile, "then it may be that you will find your desire for justice evaporating."

CHAPTER XV

A PACKET OF OLD LETTERS

FOR more than an hour after the departure of Idris and Beatrice, Lorelie remained where they had left her. She had sunk into a deep reverie, which, judged by the expression of her face, was of a painful character.

“Whence did Ivar obtain that vase?” she murmured. “He has always refused to tell. ‘Take it, and ask no questions,’ has always been his answer. “‘That urn,’” she continued, repeating Idris’ words, “‘formed a part of the treasure that led to a murder. Whoever gave you the urn was either the assassin, or obtained it through the agency of the assassin.’ Ivar gave it to me, but he was not the assassin. No! the deed was wrought by the hand of one who escaped from the wreck of the *Idris*. Let me read those letters again in the light of the new knowledge acquired to-day.”

She rose, and from a drawer in a cabinet took a packet of letters.

“What would Idris Breakspear give to read these!” she murmured. “But the day is not far distant when I must put them into his hands; and then,” she faltered, “and then — how great will be his contempt for me!”

Carrying the letters to the table she sat down and untied the thread that bound them.

The first one was written in a woman’s hand; and the envelope containing it bore the words, “To my daughter Lorelie.”

Madame Rochefort had, when dying, given this letter

The Viking's Skull

to Lorelie with the injunction that it was not to be read till after its writer had been laid in the grave.

"Dearest Lorelie," it ran, "it may be that the disclosure contained in this letter will cause you to view the memory of your mother with feelings of shame, if not of contempt: but leave the judgment of my conduct, or, if you should so term it, my sin, to that higher tribunal before which I now stand, and be not too quick to condemn, since no woman can rightly judge me unless she herself has stood in a similar position to mine.

"You will surmise by these words that I have some strange confession to make, and such in truth is the case.

"You, my daughter, in common with the rest of the world, have hitherto regarded Eric Marville as a murderer, and your father, Noel Rochefort, as a man of stainless honour. Learn now the truth that these opinions must be reversed: it was your father, and not Eric Marville, that murdered Henri Duchesne. And for twenty years I have kept this guilty secret locked within my breast, shielding my husband's reputation to the injury of another's.

"Let me tell the tale, and that in as few words as possible, for it is a melancholy reminiscence; why should I linger over it?

"I married your father in 1869.

"During the first year of our wedded life we lived at Nantes, your father's regiment having been stationed there.

"Our circle of friends included, besides others, the Englishman, Eric Marville; and the Gascon, Henri Duchesne. The latter, some years before, had been a suitor for my hand; and to my uneasiness I discovered that though he himself was now married, he had not abandoned his passion for me. I remained deaf to his advances. Thereupon his love turned to hatred, and, desirous of evoking my husband's suspicion and jealousy,

A Packet of Old Letters

he had the baseness to boast among his friends that he had found in me an easy conquest. Though full of secret fury your father hesitated to send a challenge, since Duchesne was deadly with pistol and sword: to face him in duel was to face certain death.

“Your father was a Corsican and took a Corsican’s way of avenging himself.

“One memorable summer night I was sitting alone in the upper room of our house, which overlooked the Place Graslin, awaiting the return of your father from the Armorique Club. The hour was late. All was quiet in the square below. I opened the window and looked out upon the moonlit night. A footstep upon the pavement attracted my attention, and stepping forwards I looked downwards over the rail of the veranda. Henri Duchesne was standing below: he looked up, saw me, and kissed his hand. At that moment, from the shadow of the doorway, there leaped a man whose fingers immediately twined themselves around Duchesne’s throat. Though taken by surprise he instantly recovered himself, and drew forth a dagger, the recent gift, as I afterwards learned, of Eric Marville.

“I tried to call for help, but found myself dumb with horror. Mutely I leaned against the rail of the veranda watching the silent and savage death-grapple taking place beneath my very feet. The dagger changed hands: a swift stroke, and Duchesne lay stretched upon the pavement.

“The whole affair did not last more than a minute. I recoiled from the veranda, cold and trembling. Though I had not seen his face I knew only too well who it was that had wrought the deed.

“I staggered to a sofa and fainted.

“When I awoke, your father was sitting beside me.

“‘It was a dream,’ I murmured.

The Viking's Skull

“‘It was no dream, Thérèse, but reality, nor do I regret the deed. He sought your dishonour. He deserved to die. It was an act of justice.’

“‘Let us fly from Nantes before you are discovered,’ I said.

“‘Unwise! Stationed here with my regiment, and living close to the scene of the deed, I dare not fly. Suspicion would fall upon me at once.’

“Next day we heard that Eric Marville had been arrested for the murder. ‘Have no fear on his account,’ said your father to me. ‘He did not commit the deed: how, then, can they prove that he did?’ The trial drew nigh, and to my dismay I learned that I, as being present in the house at the time of the murder, was cited to give evidence. Your father, anticipating every kind of question that could be put, instructed me what to say, and for many days continued drilling me in the answers I was to give. When the time came for me to take my place in court I stood up and swore an oath — heaven forgive the falsehood! — that I was asleep at the time of the murder, and heard nothing whatever of the scuffle.

“The trial ended: the prisoner was found guilty, and condemned to the guillotine. Never shall I forget Madame Marville’s cry of agony when the sentence was pronounced. How often in the dead of night have I started from sleep with that cry ringing in my ears!

“From the tribunal I returned home heart-broken by the black wickedness of which I had been guilty. If Marville died, what was I but his murderess?

“‘Noel,’ I said, that same night, ‘you will not let the innocent suffer?’

“‘What would you have me do?’ was his reply. ‘Walk to the guillotine instead of him? Upon my word, you are an affectionate wife!’

“I shuddered, for he spoke truth. I could prove the

A Packet of Old Letters

innocence of Eric Marville only at the price of Noel's death.

“ Was it for the wife to bring her husband to the guillotine ?

“ How I preserved my reason at this time I do not know. It came somewhat as a relief to learn that Marville's sentence was changed to imprisonment for life.

“ ‘ If you may not prove his innocence,’ I said, ‘ there is one thing you can do for him. Aid him to escape from prison to some far-off land, where he may live in happiness with his wife and child.’

“ ‘ Ah ! I might do that,’ your father replied. The notion seemed to appeal to his spirit of daring and adventure. ‘ That's a devilish good idea of yours, Thérèse. There would be a dash of excitement in it ! Only,’ he added, gloomily, stopping in his walk, ‘ it will mean the utter ruin of my career. It is whispered that the Ministry intend to appoint me to the next Colonial Governorship. I should like to see the fellow free, but his rescue must be left to others. It cannot be done by me. I should have to escape with him, and become exiled from France forever. No ! no ! it's impossible.’

“ But I would not let the idea sleep. I gave him no rest, continually urging him to the work of rescue, even threatening to reveal the truth in connection with the murder, till at last, wearied by my importunities, he matured a plan for Marville's rescue. The result you know. After an imprisonment of five years Eric Marville escaped from Valàgenêt Prison, and was hurried on board the yacht *Nemesis* that was waiting for him in Quilaix Bay. Your father went with him ; as a law-breaker he could not remain in France. I would have accompanied their flight, but the hour of your birth was drawing near. It had been arranged, therefore, that I should join them at a later date. Alas ! I never set eyes upon your father

The Viking's Skull

again. He corresponded with me at irregular intervals, but after a lapse of eighteen months his letters ceased. The yacht in which he was cruising from place to place foundered off the English coast, and I have no reason to believe that he escaped a watery grave.

“ If thus certain of his death, why, you may ask, did I not immediately make known the truth concerning the murder ?

“ Fear for myself, love for you, were the motives prompting me to concealment.

“ I was an accessory after the fact, a perjurer likewise, and therefore amenable to the law. You were a babe of eighteen months, pretty and charming, the light of my life. To proclaim the truth meant imprisonment for me, separation from you ; and withal, disgrace upon our common name. I could not bear the thought of this, and, therefore, deaf to the voice of justice, I continued to keep the truth hidden.

“ But now, assured by the physician that I have not many days to live, I dare not die without making you the confidante of my guilty secret.

“ This letter, signed with my name, together with your father's correspondence, which is contained in my private desk, will afford sufficient evidence of the innocence of Eric Marville.

“ To you, then, my daughter, I leave the duty of clearing the memory of an injured man, hoping that you will be brave enough to face the consequent ignominy which must forever rest upon our name.

“ THÉRÈSE ROCHEFORT.”

Lorelie laid down the letter with a sigh.

“ But I was not brave enough,” she murmured.

Her father, Noel Rochefort, was credited with having destroyed a brilliant future by his chivalrous enterprise

A Packet of Old Letters

of rescuing from prison a friend whom he deemed to be innocent : and, as the daughter of such, Lorelie, wherever she went, found herself an object of interest and sympathy, almost a heroine. Must she now proclaim that her father, the supposed hero, was in reality a murderer, and one, too, so base that in order to save his own neck he would have seen an innocent man, and his friend, go to the guillotine ?

She was sixteen years of age at the time of her mother's death, and lovely in face and figure ; her friends flattered her vanity by averring that with her beauty and accomplishments she might win the love of a nobleman, or even of a prince ! But what nobleman or prince would marry the daughter of a felon ? Therefore, she resolved to let the truth be hidden. If Eric Marville were still living he was free ; let him rejoice in that fact : if dead, her attestation of his innocence would do him no good. True, she knew that Marville had left a son, who must often have felt shame at the stigma resting on his name. But this son would now be twenty-three years of age ; he had grown up, she cynically argued, accustomed to the feeling, whereas in her case the knowledge had come upon her with a sudden and overwhelming shock. She pictured the pitying looks of her friends, the gibes of the malicious (for her beauty had made for her many enemies), and she shrank from facing the new situation. No : let the unknown Idris Marville bear the disgrace that of right belonged to her. And when, a month or two later, she learned from the newspapers that this same Idris Marville had perished in a fire at Paris, she felt a sense of relief.

But retribution was to follow !

The day came when her life was in such danger that she must have perished but for the providential help of a certain stranger ; and when that stranger proved to be

The Viking's Skull

none other than the Idris Marville whom she was wronging by her guilty silence, her feeling of remorse was so great that she was almost tempted to leap from the rock into the sea. To withhold the truth was pain, yet to declare it would be to earn Idris' contempt. Every kindly word, every pleasant look on his part, had gone to her heart like so many thrusts of steel.

The irony of fate! She had married Viscount Walden in the expectation of succeeding to a coronet, and now the belief was gradually forming in her mind that Idris was the rightful heir of Ravenhall: Beatrice Ravengar, and not herself, was destined to be the Countess of Ormsby.

O, if at the age of sixteen, and following the dictates of justice, she had tried to find Idris Marville, and finding, had given him her mother's written confession, how different her life might have been! Idris would perhaps have been attracted by her then as he had been seven years later. But now? She was united to a husband whom she felt to be worthless: a husband who had ceased to care for her: a husband whose title of right belonged to Idris.

"I am justly punished," she murmured, bitterly.

The remaining contents of the packet drawn by Lorelie from the escritoire consisted of the correspondence mentioned by Madame Rochefort in her inculpatory letter.

Arranging these missives according to the order of time in which they were written Lorelie took up the first, which dealt with the events that followed upon the flight from Quilaix.

"The Pelayo Hotel, Pajares.
25th April, 1875.

"The newspapers will already have told you how ad-

A Packet of Old Letters

mirably the rescue was planned and carried out, so I need not dwell upon that point.

“ There was, however, one awkward hitch in the arrangement — the death of Mrs. Marville : but I am not to blame for *that*. Had Eric listened to me it would not have happened ; my intention was to proceed direct to the yacht : he would turn aside to take his wife with him : now he has no wife.

“ Eric Marville is free, and I hope you are satisfied.

“ The superscription of this letter will show you that we are no longer on board the *Nemesis*.

“ ‘ What is Pajares ? ’ you may ask. A mere hamlet on the northern slope of the Asturian Sierras, so high up as to be almost in the clouds : and the building dignified with the name of hotel is but a miserable log *posada*.

“ How we come to be here is soon told.

“ To fly from Quilaix to the open sea was an easy task : the difficulty was to attain dry land again in safety ; for, as our romantic escapade would form the chief topic in all the newspapers, it was pretty certain that at every port a watch would be kept for our yacht. We feared putting into harbour. But land we must — somewhere. We could not cruise forever on the open main. How to land without detection was the problem.

“ Chance decided our course of action. We lay becalmed in a wild rocky bay off the Asturian coast. Anchoring a mile from land we swept the shore with the glass : there was neither village nor human dwelling visible, not a living creature in sight. It was the very spot for our purpose ; and, as if to favour us still more, a mist came on. Marville proposed that we should go ashore in the boat, and get rid of the tell-tale yacht by scuttling it there and then. I was compelled to agree to this plan, for I could devise none better. It went to my heart to

The Viking's Skull

watch the beautiful *Nemesis* sinking out of sight forever, but it would have gone to my heart still more to be captured by a French cruiser, and provided with a cell at Valàgenêt.

“ Fortunately, the sea was as smooth as glass and the wind still as we rowed off, otherwise enveloped in a fog on an ironbound coast we might have fared ill. We ran the boat ashore in safety, destroyed it immediately afterwards, and paid off our crew, who were as glad as ourselves to be quit of the yacht, for they, too, as fellow-conspirators in the rescue-plot, were amenable to justice.

“ We dispersed: and since the crew went eastward, Marville and I turned our faces westward, and walking all night as chance directed, found ourselves at early dawn at Gijon, where we rested. We assumed the character of pedestrian tourists. From Gijon we moved on to Oviedo, and thence to the mountain-hamlet of Pajares, where I write this.

“ I have found Marville far from being a pleasant companion: the death of his wife has gloomed his spirits, and has poisoned the pleasure he might otherwise derive from his newly-acquired freedom.

“ His talk, on the few occasions when he *does* talk, turns mainly upon that accident, and upon the look of horror which his boy gave him. ‘ He will never want to see me again,’ he mutters moodily.

“ I was not sorry when he proposed that we should part. He saw that his gloom was an ill-match for my cheerful nature. With his love of mountaineering he resolved to cross the sierras, and to penetrate into Leon. He set off without a guide. From the door of the *posada* I watched him ascending the mountain-path, his solitary black form outlined against the white snow. He dwindled to a speck, and that was the last I saw of him. Shall we ever see each other again? He forgot to make

A Packet of Old Letters

arrangements for a future meeting, and I didn't remind him of the point.

“ He has done me irreparable injury. For him I have wrecked a brilliant military career, lost a Colonial Governorship, and made myself an exile forever from *la belle France*. Why should I confess the deed to him? Haven't I made the fellow sufficient atonement?”

Lorelie took up another letter, which was dated more than a twelvemonth after the first.

“ Hôtel d'Angleterre,
Salerno,
10th May, 1876.

“ I verily believe that the continual mention of an absent evil has the power of causing that evil to appear. In every one of your letters you have alluded, despite my forbiddance, to Eric Marville and his innocence. Your persistency in this respect seems to have raised him up again from the things of the past— a past I was beginning to forget.

“ You can guess what is coming.

“ I have met with Eric Marville. More than a year has passed since I parted from him in the village inn of Pajares, hoping never more to set eyes upon him: and now his disturbing presence is with me again. ‘ Disturbing?’ you say. Yes. You know the aphorism, ‘ We hate those whom we have injured;’ and I suppose I *have* injured him: you so often say it in your letters that I have come at last to believe it.

“ What folly led me to Campania? I might have foreseen our meeting; for, prior to the rescue, did not I transfer his banking account under an assumed name to Messrs. Stradella, of Naples?

“ But to our meeting.

The Viking's Skull

“Yesterday I made an excursion to Paestum, and, fortunately, had the place to myself. Not one tourist was there. Solitary and charmed I wandered for a whole day among the magnificent ruins of the past.

“Amid the stillness of a lovely twilight I sat down at the base of a marble column belonging to the Temple of Neptune. The whole circle of the sky, from the wine-dark sea before me to the peaks of the cypress-clad mountains behind, was flushed with the deep violet hues to be seen only in this southern clime.

“I smoked a cigar and drank in the pure air of peace. It was a time disposing one to turn poet, monk, or somebody equally moral. I had almost forgotten that night at Nantes.

“Suddenly my eye caught sight of a shadow. I looked up; and there was Eric Marville watching me with an expression that made me feel uneasy, I could not tell why.

“On seeing that I had noticed him he came forward. He did not offer his hand, but smiled mysteriously, almost exultantly, so it seemed to me, and took a seat opposite me on a fallen pillar.

“At first we talked commonplaces. Presently he remarked:

“‘I am going yachting among the fiords of Norway. You must accompany me.’

“His manner implied that *he* was master and *I* servant! Why should he desire me for his *compagnon de voyage*, seeing that, as matters are at present, we are so unlike each other, he gloomy, I gay?

“‘There is a fine yacht for sale at Naples. The price is moderate. I propose that we divide it between us.’

“Do you believe, Thérèse, that man is a free agent, with full control over his own actions? Of course you answer ‘Yes’; your father-confessor has preached the

A Packet of Old Letters

doctrine a hundred times. I answer 'No'! How, otherwise, can I account for my conduct? I hate the fellow; I do not wish to go yachting; I have a presentiment that ill will come of it. Nevertheless, I have given him my promise. Explain *that*, if you can."

" The Hôtel Crocelle, Naples,
2d June, 1876.

" The transfer of the yacht is complete. It is as pretty a vessel as one could desire. Over it my first open variance with Marville arose. I say 'open,' because, secretly, we have been in a state of hostility to each other since the day of our meeting at Paestum.

" Marville was desirous of changing the name of our new-bought yacht. I suggested *Lorelie*, after the little daughter whom I trust one day to see; he wished it to be called *Idris*, after *his* child. The spin of a coin decided the point in his favour. The crew are all English, and have given proof of it. When Marville ordered the new name to be painted, they begged him not to rechristen the vessel, declaring that to do so would bring ill-luck. Marville treated their opinion with contempt. He rolled up his shirt-sleeves, slung a plank over the side, and set to work himself, painting the name *Idris* as if to the manner born. Two of the crew deserted in consequence. Strange that English sailors, so bold in fight, should be so superstitious!"

" The Yacht *Idris*, Gibraltar,
7th July, 1876.

" Marville is a wretched companion. Twelve months of freedom ought to have made him as bright and gay as in the old days, instead of which he is the same melancholy being who left me at Pajares, with only one topic of conversation — his unjust conviction.

The Viking's Skull

“ You ask me whether I shall ever tell him that it was I who slew Duchesne? You might as well ask me whether I want my throat cut at once? That little affair at Nantes was the beginning of a train of circumstances that ended in the death of his wife. He would hold me primarily responsible for this last unlucky accident. Tell him the true story! I would as soon tell the Minister of Justice, who would at least see that I had a fair trial, whereas Marville, in his present state of gloom, is incapable of listening to reason. Yesterday, while toying with his knife at dinner, he muttered, ‘ I would that the assassin of Duchesne were before me now!’ You can guess how I felt at those words. I am in a trying situation. Every day I have to listen to a new theory accounting for the cause of the murder, with remarks as to how an intelligent detective ought to set to work. It is not enough for me to smoke in silence; he wants to hear theories from *me* on the matter, and becomes angry because I have none to give. I wish to God he would talk of something else besides the one everlasting theme! I feel that I shall be betraying myself some day.

“ You remember the silver altar-ring engraved with runic letters, the ring that he entrusted to my secret keeping on the morning of his arrest? After his trial I handed the relic to his wife, but scarcely knowing why, I made a copy of the runic inscription. This copy happened to be among my papers on board the *Nemesis*, and, believe me, when leaving the sinking yacht, Marville betrayed more concern over this wretched piece of writing than over anything else on board.

“ It seems that he has been studying my transcript during the past year, trying to extract some meaning from it: and though failing hitherto, he still perseveres.

“ He talks oddly at times, and I am beginning to be-

A Packet of Old Letters

lieve that his mind is unhinged. He declared to-day that he is the rightful heir to a peerage, and could take his rank to-morrow if he chose. Of course I believe this!"

" The Yacht *Idris*, Penzance,
12th July, 1876.

" If you perceive a difference in my penmanship ascribe it to my trembling hand. I am in a state of nervous fear. The strangest, the most inexplicable, the weirdest event of my life, happened yesterday. I was cleansing my hands in a bowl of water. Marville was standing beside me. Suddenly he observed in a very strange tone, ' Do your hands always redden the water like that? '

" I glance downwards. The water in the basin — believe me or not, as you will — was as crimson as blood! My God! it looked for all the world like the water in which I washed my hands that night!

" I could see by the mirror that my face had turned as white as chalk. My agitation was too obvious to escape Marville's notice. He smiled strangely, and turned away. What does it mean? Can it be that he suspects me of — *that*? I have not yet recovered from the shock, though it happened twenty-four hours ago, nor have I washed my hands since then. My God! if it should happen again! I never expected to feel regret for the death of Duchesne; nevertheless, I do. It has reduced me to a devilishly nervous state of mind. I suppose moralists would say that I am suffering retribution.

" One of the sailors declares that he heard me talking in my sleep. I must keep my cabin-door locked at night. If I should babble of *that*, and wake to find Marville sitting by my bedside with an awful smile and with glassy eyes fixed on me!"

The Viking's Skull

“The Yacht *Idris*, Trondheim,
10th September, 1876.

“I verily believe that Marville is mad! He pretends that he has deciphered the runic inscription. It relates to the buried treasure of an old Norse Viking — which treasure, he avers, still exists in the spot where it was hidden, a thousand years ago, the site being some point on the eastern coast of England. A short run across the North Sea will bring us to the place. He is bent on finding it. Is it not clear that he is mad?”

“Hitherto *I* have taken charge of the yacht. Now *he* has assumed the command, heedless of my mild protests. The crew do not like this change of masters. His seamanship is of the wildest character. He delights to sport with reefs and eddies, with winds and storms. Thank heaven! we are going no farther north, or he would take a diabolical pleasure in steering us all into the Maelstrom in order to demonstrate how cleverly he could get us out again. This may be all very well for him, who is in love with death, but for my part I prefer to live.

“He has exchanged his former melancholy mood for one of reckless mirth. He drinks: talks loudly: laughs: and promises to divide his imaginary treasure among the crew. ‘To obtain it,’ he says, ‘we shall have to penetrate to the chamber of the dead, for its hiding-place is the tomb. But the ancient curse must be fulfilled; and you,’ he added, turning to me, ‘shall be our Protesilaus.’

“My classics have grown rusty. Who the devil was Protesilaus?”

“The Yacht *Idris*, Bergen,
7th October, 1876.

“I have discovered who Protesilaus was — a Greek hero who sacrificed his life to procure the safety of his

A Packet of Old Letters

friends. Curious! What does Marville mean by calling me Protesilaus?

“A strange occurrence took place last night. A subdued wailing was heard among the shrouds. The thick fog prevented us from discovering the origin of the sound. Fear fell on the crew, and none of them would ascend the rigging to ascertain the cause. They muttered that it was a ghost, and that it foreboded ill to all on board. Marville laughed at them for a pack of fools! Of course it was nothing but the moaning of some sea-bird, but, for all that, in my then state of mind it was sufficiently disquieting.

“I retired to rest, but only to lie awake all night with that eerie sound playing around the vessel. The sailors have lost all cheerfulness, and believe themselves to be living on a doomed ship. ‘What vessel ever did well, after she was re-named?’ asked one. I confess that I myself am affected by the general gloom, but when I expressed to Marville my intention of remaining at Bergen till his return from the treasure-search, he cried, ‘No, no! you, of all persons, must not leave us.’ Why not? I thought of Protesilaus again.

“The more I consider his moody watchful manner towards me of late, the more convinced I grow that he suspects me of the killing of Duchesne. He has lured me on board this yacht with the object of torturing my conscience; by perpetually dwelling upon the crime he hopes to entrap me into a confession. So far he has failed, but my position is a terrible one. I feel intuitively that he is maturing some scheme of vengeance.

“‘Why do I not escape?’ you may ask. Impossible! The sailors, I believe, have orders to watch me. If I go ashore he accompanies me, ostensibly from friendship, in reality to keep guard over me. His dreadful smile fascinates me, and chains me to him. I seem to have lost all

The Viking's Skull

freedom of will and action, and to have fallen completely under the spell of some weird being from another world. I feel that ere long he will draw the secret from me.

“When I behold my reflection in the glass I cannot refrain from the thought, ‘Can that be the once brilliant and handsome Rochefort?’ I look ten years older—grey, haggard. I should be quite safe in returning to France, for no one would recognize me now.

“If there be a tribunal above to which one is responsible for the deeds done on earth, I trust that the remorse I have suffered of late will be taken into account.”

“The Yacht *Idris*. In Ormsby Roads,
13th October, 1876, 7 p.m.

“We are anchored off the English coast in front of a little town called Ormsby-on-Sea. To the right of the town and about a mile from the shore rise the towers of some old castle, embowered in a woodland vale, and forming a pretty feature in the landscape. Marville seems to take a great interest in this edifice; all this morning he has been studying it through the telescope.

“‘Haven’t seen the place for ten years,’ he muttered. ‘wonder if *he* is still alive.’

“I asked him the name of the place. A scowl was my only answer. He hasn’t improved in amiability since we left Bergen. In the dictatorial spirit assumed by him of late he will not permit any of us to land. He himself is going ashore for some purpose which he refuses to disclose. He will not return to the yacht till tomorrow. I am dispatching this letter to the post by the sailor who is to row Marville ashore—a sailor whom I can trust.—Farewell!”

“The last letter we ever received from him,” murmured Lorelie, laying down the missive.

A Packet of Old Letters

The tone of the final letters conveyed an impression terrible in its suggestiveness to her mind now that by means of her hypnotic experiment she had become aware of the tragedy that had taken place within the interior of Ormfell.

“The *Idris* went down on the evening of October 13th,” she murmured, “and late that same night Olave Ravengar returned to Ravenhall after an absence of ten years. Is this a coincidence, or is the present earl the same person as Eric Marville? Did my father go down with the yacht, or did he escape the sea only to fall within the interior of Ormfell by the hand of the man whom he had wronged?”

CHAPTER XVI

LORELIE AT RAVENHALL

LORD WALDEN was reading a newspaper one afternoon in the quietude of his own room at Ravenhall, when the step of some person entering the chamber unannounced caused him to look up, and he found Lorelie standing before him.

“Hul-lo!” he muttered, throwing down the newspaper, and startled beyond measure at seeing his wife so near his father’s presence. “What brings *you* here?”

“To claim my rights,” she answered quietly. “Why should the wife occupy a modest villa while the husband lives in castled state?”

She took off her toque and mantle, threw them upon the table, and, with the air of one who had come to stay, sat down in an armchair opposite him.

For some moments Ivar frowned darkly at his fair young wife, and was obviously dismayed by her determination.

When the earl, a few weeks previously, had urged upon him the necessity for marrying Beatrice, Ivar had lacked the courage to confess that he had a wife already, knowing that the statement would be certain to evoke his father’s anger, and Ivar stood in considerable awe of his father.

Accordingly, he had made a pretence of submission, and had gone so far as to delude the earl with the fiction that he was paying successful court to Beatrice. This contemptible subterfuge was not one that could be long continued in any circumstances; but Lorelie’s sudden

Lorelie at Ravenhall

resolve for recognition threatened to bring matters to a climax that very day.

"You have come here to create a vulgar scene before all the servants, I see," scowled Ivar.

"I have come here to redeem my name," she answered indignantly. "Do you know that at the flower-show yesterday ladies turned aside to avoid me, and that I caught the half-whispered words, 'Lord Walden's mistress'? Do you wish me to return to The Cedars to live there under such a name? I will keep silent no longer. To day all Ormsby shall know that I am Viscountess Walden."

Vainly did Ivar try to temporize, to persuade, to cajole, to threaten. Lorelie continued inflexible.

"Take me to your father," she said. "My maiden name will compel him to acknowledge me."

"What is there in the name of Rivière to charm him?" asked Ivar, in surprise.

"Nothing, but much in the name of Rochefort," she answered, rising to her feet. "Will you go with me, or shall I go alone to inform him that I have married a craven who lacks the spirit and courage to tell the truth?"

Ivar saw the necessity of yielding. Looking with a very ill grace at his wife he touched a hand-bell on the table.

"Where is the earl?" he asked of the footman, who appeared in answer to the summons.

"His lordship is taking the air on the western terrace," was the reply.

The viscount rose and moved off in the direction of the said terrace accompanied by his wife, while the footman stared curiously after them.

Lorelie had come to Ravenhall for the purpose of verifying, if possible, the strange suspicion she had of

The Viking's Skull

late begun to entertain that the present Earl of Ormsby was none other than Eric Marville. If this surmise were correct, it behoved her to make known to him the truth concerning the murder of Duchesne. But of what avail was it to clear the character of Eric Marville from the guilt of the long-past crime, if her other suspicion should prove true that he was the slayer of her father? She was precluded from denouncing him for this latter deed by reason of her position as his daughter-in-law, and by the thought that Captain Rochefort, in falling by the hand of the man whom he had wronged, had met with a justly merited doom.

If the earl were really Eric Marville, it followed that Idris, as his elder son, was being unjustly deprived of his rights by the younger half-brother Ivar.

Ignorant of the causes that had contributed to render Idris an object of aversion to the earl, Lorelie, nevertheless, determined to compel the earl to acknowledge him. Thus much justice should at least be done. And in coming to this resolve Lorelie tried to persuade herself that she was actuated simply by the desire for justice, whereas her heart more truly told her that secret love for Idris was her controlling motive.

On reaching the western terrace they found the earl standing at one end of it with his back towards them. He had just come from the library after a long spell of study, and was now refreshing his tired eyes by a contemplation of the lawns and the woods that surrounded his castellated mansion.

On hearing footsteps he turned, and his cold grey eyes lighted upon Lorelie: not, however, for the first time, since her pew in St. Oswald's Church faced his own; but beyond the fact that she was called Mademoiselle Rivière he knew nothing whatever respecting her, and, it may be added, had no desire to know more.

Lorelie at Ravenhall

He supposed that Ivar had been showing her over his historic mansion, portions of which were open to the public on certain days. But this western terrace was private ground, reserved for the family. What did Ivar mean by bringing this young lady to him, who had no desire for an introduction? With something like a frown upon his face he awaited their approach.

Could this cold and dignified peer of the realm, thought Lorelie, be the man who, twenty-three years before, had escaped from a felon's cell in Brittany? Was this really the father of Idris? It seemed too strange to be true. Was his the face that Beatrice in her hypnotic trance had seen peering into the Viking's tomb? A chilling sensation seized her as Ivar escorted her towards the presence of the man whom she believed to be her father's murderer.

Lord Ormsby was the first to speak.

"Mademoiselle Rivière, I believe," he said, bowing stiffly.

"Not so, my lord."

"No?" queried the earl.

"No!" she replied with a smile that annoyed him. As if it mattered to him who she was!

"Hum, some mistake. What name, then, may I ask——?"

"Viscountess Walden, my lord," she replied, with an air as stately as his own.

For a few moments the earl's surprise was too great for words. He sank upon a stone seat, and stared from one to the other.

"You hear what this woman says," he remarked in a harsh voice, turning to his son. "Is it true?"

"We are married—yes," returned Ivar, sullenly.

"You have given me to understand," continued the earl, "that you were paying your addresses to Beatrice."

The Viking's Skull

"Father, listen to me," muttered Ivar. "I was already married at the time when you pressed Beatrice's name upon me, and seeing how earnestly you were set upon the match I—I lacked the courage to—to state the truth."

Lorelie heard her husband's words with secret contempt. The craven was almost apologizing for marrying her! With an effort she controlled her feelings, and remained silent.

Casting a contemptuous glance at his son the earl turned, and with a coldly critical eye surveyed his new daughter-in-law. Yes, she was undeniably beautiful, with an exquisite taste in dress; and bore herself with the air and dignity of a princess; clearly an ornament to Ravenhall, provided only that her antecedents were above the criticism of Society.

"And who and whence is the lady that now bears Viscount Walden's name?" he asked.

"My name is Lorelie, *née* Rochefort."

"*Rochefort?*" repeated the earl, with a sharp intonation on the word.

"I am the daughter of Captain Noel Rochefort, of Nantes."

The earl's sudden start did not escape her attentive eyes. It seemed to give confirmation to her suspicion.

"Your lordship has perhaps heard of him? His is a notable name."

"No. Yes. That is to say," replied the earl in some confusion, "unless my memory is at fault, some one of that name figured prominently in the French newspapers about twenty-three years ago. Did your father aid in the escape of a certain prisoner from Valàgenêt?"

"Your lordship has an excellent memory."

"I was in Brittany at the time of the escape, and the story was in everybody's mouth. The name of the

Lorelie at Ravenhall

prisoner was — was," pursued the earl, with the air of one striving to recall a forgotten fact, "was Eric Marville, I think."

"I must again commend your lordship's memory."

"Of what crime was this Marville found guilty?"

"He was accused of murder."

"Murder. Ay! so it was. I remember now," replied the earl with a thoughtful air.

Few could have surmised from his manner that in recalling the name of Eric Marville he was, in reality, speaking of himself, and Lorelie found herself in a state of doubt again.

"Your father," continued the earl, "was a great friend of this Marville, otherwise he would not have planned and carried out this rescue-plot?"

"We may presume that he was."

The earl's conduct would certainly have seemed singular to an ordinary by-stander. The lady before him was waiting for recognition as his daughter-in-law, but neglecting that as a matter of no consequence, he was interesting himself in events that had happened more than twenty years before. Lorelie found her suspicion returning.

"Do you know what ultimately became of this Marville — I mean of your father, or rather of both of them?"

"They went yachting together in '76, and their vessel went down in Ormsby Race."

"So near our own doors? Strange! Then this Marville was drowned?"

"I have reason to believe that he was not."

"Ay! and what is your reason?"

"My lord, do *you* ask that?" she answered with significant intonation.

"I don't understand you."

The Viking's Skull

But he did not press for her meaning ; Lorelie marked that. And there was an interval of silence ere he resumed his catechism.

“ Your father, Captain Rochefort — was *he* drowned ? ”

“ I have reasons — very strong reasons — for believing that he escaped the fury of the sea, only to be murdered.”

While speaking she kept her gaze fixed upon the earl's face to mark the effect of her words. Unless she was mistaken there was in his eyes something very like the light of fear.

“ Murdered ? ” he said. “ What leads you to this strange belief ? ”

“ With your lordship's permission I will reserve my reasons for another time. — You have not yet said,” she added quietly, “ whether you acknowledge me.”

“ You are my son's wife, and, therefore, my daughter. Welcome to Ravenhall ! ”

Rising from his seat he approached and kissed her. And at this seal of recognition Ivar heaved a sigh of relief. The trying ordeal was over, and it had not ended, as he had fancied that it might, in his enforced retirement from Ravenhall.

When the earl touched Lorelie's cheek with his lips he found her skin as cold as marble. She had submitted to the act, not knowing how to repulse it ; but — kissed by her father's murderer ! To receive such a kiss seemed to her mind like a condonation of the crime — a purchase of her position at the price of her father's blood.

She grew faint. Why was she placing herself in a position where day by day she would encounter the presence of this terrible earl ? for to her he was terrible. A great longing came upon her to go back to The Cedars ; but the thought of Idris calmed her. For his sake she would stay. Her belief that he was the rightful heir of Ravenhall was, after all, a matter of conjecture, not of

Lorelie at Ravenhall

knowledge: she must have proofs before telling him of her opinion: and, in her judgment, such proofs would be found at Ravenhall.

Hating herself for the hypocrisy she masked her feelings with a smile and endeavoured to appear gratified with her new position.

Learning that Lorelie had not yet seen the interior of Ravenhall the earl, as if wishful to conciliate her, undertook to conduct her over the mansion.

He escorted his new daughter-in-law through the finer parts of the castle, pointing out the various treasures contained within its walls: but though he talked much during this tour of inspection Lorelie was conscious all the time of being furtively scanned by him, as if he were trying to fathom her character and aims: and the belief was borne in upon her mind that she was the object of his suspicion and fear.

He bade her select as her own whatever apartments might take her fancy, and introduced her to the house-keeper, telling the latter that, as regarded the domestic arrangements of Ravenhall, she must now receive her orders from the new viscountess. Then, having rendered these honours, the earl went back to his library with the remark that they would meet again at dinner.

“Egad, we’re in luck’s way!” exclaimed the delighted Ivar. “Who’d have thought the old boy would prove so gracious? But why have you always kept it a secret from me that you are Captain Rochefort’s daughter?” He gave Lorelie no time to reply, for, suddenly struck by a new thought, he continued, “O, by the way, just a hint, lest you should unwittingly betray a secret of mine. Don’t let the governor ever know that I have given you a golden vase.”

“Very well, Ivar. But may I ask your reason for this caution?”

The Viking's Skull

The viscount tugged the ends of his light moustache with a shamefacedness very unusual in him.

"Hum! ah! well! I suppose I had better speak the truth. The fact is I've had to forestall my future heritage by appropriating some pieces of the family plate."

"Appropriating! That is a good word, Ivar."

"Call it what you like. It was necessitated by the expense of keeping a wife. Your tastes are costly. Pictures, works of art, rare furniture, rich dresses are the breath of life to you. Deny it if you can. I was obliged to resort to some expedient in order to satisfy your extravagance. That vase was one of my — er — appropriations. I gave it to you to convert into cash, but you seem to prefer keeping it."

"And so the money you have given me during the past few months has come from the sale of this plate?"

Ivar nodded assent.

"Was this plate contained in the jewel-room through which the earl has just taken us?"

"O, dear no! The store I refer to is far too valuable and tempting to be exposed to the eyes of even the oldest and most trusted of our family servants — at least, that's the governor's opinion. He is somewhat eccentric, you know. So he keeps this treasure to himself in a secret place."

Lorelie did not ask Ivar to name this secret place: she had her own opinion as to the locality, and would not have believed Ivar if he had declared it to be elsewhere.

"Your father inspects these treasures occasionally, I presume?"

"Of course — with the joy of an old miser."

"And he keeps a catalogue of them?"

"You bet he does!"

"Then how have you contrived to keep your appropriations undiscovered?"

Lorelie at Ravenhall

A look of low conceit and cunning overspread the face of the viscount.

“Ah! that’s my secret. The governor thinks he still possesses the missing plate. It’s there before his eyes, and yet it isn’t there. He sees it, and yet he doesn’t see it. He’s an artful fellow, the old boy! But for once he’s been outwitted. You don’t understand. Some day I’ll explain my meaning. Meantime, remember, mum’s the word on this business.”

And here Ivar went off to inspect a new hunter that had just arrived, while Lorelie turned away with a look of unspeakable horror in her eyes.

“So the Viking’s treasure found its way to Ravenhall,” she murmured. “And by whose hand it is clear. The price of my father’s blood! My God! to think that I have been living on money derived from such a source!”

That same evening at sunset Lorelie sat alone on the grand terrace overlooking the undulating landscape that surrounded Ravenhall. Behind her rose the ivied mansion with its fine halls and treasures of art. Roses, glowing in sculptured vases along the terrace, filled the air with their sweetness. Marble fountains flashed aloft their silvery spray. Below, in front of her, green lawns and woodlands stretched away to the margin of a shimmering lake—all bathed in the dusky golden glow of sunset.

This day should have been one of the proudest of her life. She had received recognition from the earl, and was now an acknowledged wife, a peeress, and the destined queen of the county-side.

While living at The Cedars she had been slighted by some of the society of Ormsby, and had been cruelly traduced by others; how great, then, would be the mortification of her enemies to learn that the person whom they had contemned held the proud rank of Viscountess

The Viking's Skull

Walden! They would be but too willing now to efface the past and do her homage; for, to be on visiting terms at Ravenhall was the ambition of all the *élite* of Ormsby. What a triumph for her! Youth and beauty, rank and wealth — all were hers!

That was one side of the medal; how different the reverse!

Her father was a murderer; her father-in-law was a murderer; her husband was, in his own language, an "appropriator," or, in other words, a thief: and she herself was but a spy at Ravenhall, seeking for proofs to deprive him of his prospective wealth and title! Even now he manifested indifference to her: what would be his feelings if, through her instrumentality, Idris Breakspear should succeed to the coronet of the Ravengars?

Whether she spoke out, or whether she remained mute, a melancholy future lay before her. On the one hand splendour purchased at the price of injustice to Idris: on the other the lifelong hatred of her husband for preferring the interests of Idris to his own.

The voice of Ivar jarred upon her meditations. He was lounging along the terrace smoking the inevitable cigarette.

"My lady doesn't seem very happy now that she dwells 'in marble halls, with vassals and serfs by her side.' Look around you," he continued, with a sweep of his arm that took in the whole landscape. "As far as you can see, north, east, south, and west, all is ours. Isn't the prospect fair enough for you?"

"As fair as the Dead Sea fruit — all ashes to the taste."

She lifted her head, and he saw that her face was pale, that her eyes were suffused with tears, that her expression was one of unutterable melancholy.

"Why the devil did you come here, if you don't like

Lorelie at Ravenhall

it? Upon my word you are hard to please! Is this your gratitude to the pater for his gracious reception of you!"

"To be called 'Viscountess Walden,' and 'Your ladyship,'" she murmured to herself, "knowing all the time that I am listening to a lie!"

Ivar started, but made no reply. He lounged off to the end of the terrace, where he stood watching his wife with a dark expression on his face.

"Got a fit of the blues on!" he muttered. "Thinking of Breakspear, and how hard it is he should be kept from his own, and so forth. By God! supposing she lets her craze for that fellow carry her to the extreme of declaring the truth! She loves him, and a woman in love will commit any folly. She's not to be trusted."

While he was occupied with these uneasy reflections a footman appeared, carrying on a silver salver a letter addressed to the viscount.

Ivar gave a start when he perceived the handwriting on the envelope, and ere opening it cast a glance at the distant Lorelie.

The note was a sweet-scented one, signed "Lilias Winter," and contained a request for a subscription to a local charity, at least so the simple-minded would have read it, but to Ivar it conveyed a very different meaning. Interpreted by a prearranged code the note signified that on the part of the sender circumstances were favourable that night for receiving a visit from the viscount. For Ivar, with a perversity of taste, not uncommon in the immoral, found more pleasure in carrying on an intrigue with a widow of forty than in cultivating the society of his fair young wife.

A few days previously, when ignorant of the existence of Idris, the viscount would have laughed in Lorelie's face had she reproached him with this amour.

The Viking's Skull

Now he suddenly became conscious that this intrigue was no laughing matter.

His succession to the title and estates depended on his wife's good will. Any act on his part tending to provoke her might end in his ruin. When the handsome widow, who had entertained hopes herself of one day becoming Viscountess Walden, should learn of Ivar's marriage, disappointment and jealousy might prompt her to reveal this amour to Lorelie. And then — ? Ill usage from her husband Lorelie might tolerate, but infidelity, never! Goaded by such an outrage she would fling his interests to the winds, and make it known that Idris was the rightful heir of Ravenhall.

"No help for it," muttered Ivar. "I must tell the governor at once, and tell him all without disguise; that Idris Marville is not only alive, but dwelling here to-day at Ormsby; that Lorelie suspects who he is, and that Lilius will have to be bribed into silence, otherwise she will create a scandal of which Lorelie will avail herself to our confusion and ruin. Breakspear at present is ignorant of his lineage; something must be done to prevent him from ever learning it — *but what?*"

* * * * *

The lights in the library at Ravenhall burned till a late hour that night, or rather they were continued till far into the morning.

The sleep of the new viscountess in her distant bed-chamber was fitful and troubled, but there would have been no sleep at all for her could she have known the character of the conversation taking place in the library between the Ravengars, father and son.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SECRET OF THE FUNERAL CRYPT

ON the day following her recognition at Ravenhall Lorelie sat at luncheon with the earl and the viscount. The servants had retired, leaving them free to indulge in private conversation.

“To my fair daughter-in-law,” said the earl, touching his glass with his lips and bowing to Lorelie, who returned the greeting but coldly. The space of twenty-four hours had not reconciled her any the more to his presence.

“Do you know that old Lanfranc is dead?” remarked Ivar, addressing his father.

“No. Where did you learn that?”

“Saw it just now in the obituary column of the *Times*.”

“May one ask who Lanfranc is?” said Lorelie.

“Sir George Lanfranc,” replied the earl, “is ——”

“Was,” corrected Ivar.

“Our family solicitor,” continued the earl, with a frown — he hated to be corrected — “and one of the privileged four admitted to the knowledge of our secret funeral vault.”

“The other three being ——?” queried Lorelie.

“Ivar and I, as a matter of course: and the Rector of Ormsby.”

“I think I could name a fifth,” murmured Lorelie to herself.

For, on the day prior to her coming to Ravenhall she had chanced to meet with Godfrey, and, moved by a

The Viking's Skull

sudden impulse, he had told her how he had followed Ivar to the crypt and what had happened there, not omitting Lord Walden's utterance that it was done on Lorelie's account. The story was a complete revelation to her, and, while thanking Godfrey for his communication, she determined to discover the meaning of the strange affair with which Ivar had associated her name. A favourable opportunity seemed now to present itself, and she resolved to essay a bold stroke.

"We shall have to choose some one to supply Lanfranc's place," said the earl, turning to his son.

"Permit me to offer myself," suggested Lorelie.

Lord Ormsby raised his eyebrows in manifest surprise.

"Ladies have never been admitted to that vault," he replied. "In that respect it resembles the Baptist's Chapel in the Genoese Cathedral."

"But that chapel *is* open to ladies on one day in the year," replied Lorelie. "Therefore, your parallel will not hold."

"Are you really serious in making this suggestion?" asked the earl.

"Perfectly."

"What is your reason?"

Lorelie shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't require reason from a woman," she replied. "It would be hard for me to give my reason. Curiosity, mainly: the desire of seeing what no other woman has seen, or ever will see."

"The initiated have to swear an oath to keep the secret," said Ivar.

"That gives quite a romantic charm to the adventure," Lorelie replied.

The earl sat silent for a moment as if weighing the matter, and then cast at his son a look which seemed to

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

convey a silent suggestion, a suggestion that appeared to meet with tacit acceptance from the other.

“There is really no reason why we should not admit you to the vault,” he remarked. “Better one of the family than an outsider. And you are one of us now,” he added with a sigh, as though the fact were much to be regretted. “You shall be one of the privileged four, if you desire it. When would you like to pay your first visit?”

“Why not now?” she asked impulsively, rising from her seat as she spoke.

“Humph!” replied the earl, thoughtfully. “Suppose we say to-night. The late hour will enable us the better to escape the prying eyes of the servants. You consent? Good! Then we will meet in this dining-hall a little before twelve to-night. But — not a whisper of this to any one. Let the matter be kept secret.”

Lorelie rose and sought the retirement of her own room, not without wonder that the earl should accept her strange proposal almost as soon as he heard it. Then, as she recalled the curious look he had cast at Ivar, together with his injunction to observe secrecy respecting the intended visit, there swept over her a sudden wave of cold feeling induced by a thought so dreadful that she could scarcely bring herself to entertain it. But the idea would persist in stamping itself in letters of fire upon her mind.

“I know he hates me!” she gasped. “I saw that in his eyes when he first heard my name. I know he hates me, but — my God! to such an extent as *that!* Is he afraid that the daughter will seek to avenge her father? And will he get Ivar to consent?”

While she was occupied with these terrible misgivings her husband came slouching in. He seated himself on a chair and regarded her for a moment with a strange expression that set her trembling.

The Viking's Skull

"So you've quite made up your mind to visit the vault?"

She assented with a nod, not daring to trust herself to speak. Her heart was beating like a steam-hammer; faint murmurs were ringing in her ears; she seemed to see Ivar as through a mist.

"Bah! you lack the courage. You will be crying off from the venture before the night comes."

His sneer roused her spirit, and she spoke in a low tone, striving to control the tremors of her voice.

"I will not cry off: no," she added, emphasizing her words, as if to fix his attention, "not if it should end in my death."

Ivar started and glanced suspiciously at her.

Suddenly Lorelie rose, and walking to an oak-press produced a small piece of faded black velvet fringed on one edge with silver lace. Sitting down with needle and thread she proceeded with deft fingers to manipulate this velvet into a sort of ornamental bow, without cutting the fabric or in any way diminishing its original size.

Her husband moodily watched her, wondering why she should form a dress-ornament from such faded stuff and why she should select this particular juncture for making it.

"What's that thing you are making?" he asked in a sullen voice.

"Merely a bow," she answered, extending the half-finished article towards him. "Of what do you suppose this velvet once formed part?"

"It might have been cut from a pall by the look of it."

"I commend your discernment. You are not far wrong."

"Perhaps you will enlighten me," he asked, scowling, as he noticed her air of satisfaction at his perplexity.

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

“It is not the first time you have seen this velvet and its parent fabric,” said Lorelie.

Approaching a mirror she held the bow against the neck-band of her dress.

“I shall wear this bow to-night. True, it does not look very pretty, yet it may serve as a talisman, and ——”

But on looking up she found that Ivar was gone. The velvet dropped to the carpet, and she clasped her hands.

“They mean it,” she murmured. “I can read it in Ivar’s guilty manner — half-resolve, half-fear: letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would.’ My God! But I will go through with it. I will put their base courage to the test.”

Her first fears had vanished, leaving her hard and firm as steel. The spirit that loves danger for its own sake, the spirit derived from her Corsican ancestors, began to reawake in the breast of their nineteenth-century descendant.

At six in the evening Lorelie, who had spent the afternoon in arranging her plan of action, stole quietly to her bedroom, having told the butler she would not come down to dinner.

“I must sleep,” she murmured, “that my faculties may be fresh and unimpaired for to-night’s work.”

Her first care was to lock and bolt the door that opened upon the corridor, and next that communicating with Ivar’s bedroom. She paid considerable attention to these doors, as well as to the fastenings of the windows. A traveller putting up for the night at some lonely and suspicious hostelry could not have shown more caution. Thus secured from intrusion she laid herself down, dressed as she was, upon the bed. But fully two hours elapsed ere she succeeded in falling asleep.

When she awoke she found herself shivering with cold and in total darkness. For a few moments she lay

The Viking's Skull

dreamily conscious that some ordeal awaited her, but unable at first to recall what it was. Then memory revived. The visit to the vault! Yes! that was it; and the thought made her pulses quicken.

She rose, procured a light, and found that it was close upon midnight.

"So late! They will begin to think that I am not coming."

Fastening the velvet bow to the neck-band of her dress she unlocked the chamber-door and walked out into the corridor. A deep silence reigned throughout the mansion, a silence that to her imagination had something awesome in it. It seemed like the prelude to a tragedy. With a firm step she descended the staircase and made her way to the dining-hall, where a murmur of voices told her that the earl and Ivar were awaiting her.

Their conversation ceased upon her entrance, and both looked up, Ivar seeming somewhat perturbed in spirit, the earl smiling and evidently pleased that she had come.

"We were just discussing the probability of your appearing," said he. "Ivar was confident that you would cry off from the business. And, certainly, a coffin-vault is not a very cheerful place."

"It is not the dead one has to fear," replied Lorelie, "but the living."

"Your wife has more courage than you gave her credit for, Ivar," remarked the earl approvingly. "If you will carry the lamp I will give her my arm."

"Thank you," replied Lorelie, declining the proffered arm, "but I can walk without aid."

They set forward from the dining-hall, the earl going first, Ivar a model of ill-grace walking beside Lorelie. He did not speak, but glanced curiously at her from time to time.

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

The expedition was so strange, so unlike anything she had ever known before, that Lorelie began to wonder whether the whole scene was not a dream. It was difficult to believe that the earl, so smiling and courteous, could really entertain the black design of which she suspected him.

At the end of the Picture Gallery they reached that little lumber-room which Godfrey Rothwell had so long hesitated to enter on that memorable night when tracking Ivar to the vault. Making his way to the hearth the earl stood in the wide space beneath the mantel, and lifting his hand within the chimney he touched what Lorelie judged was a hidden spring, for his action was immediately followed by a faint creaking of pulleys and ropes, and then the perpendicular slab forming one side of the fireplace began slowly to descend, revealing behind it an empty space.

“The secret way to our crypt,” remarked the earl.

He passed through the entrance. Ivar, who had not spoken one word since leaving the dining-hall, followed. Lorelie went last.

She looked about her. The light carried by Ivar faintly illumined the place. She was standing in a narrow passage, paved, walled, and roofed, with stone. Its length could not be ascertained by the eye, for it stretched away indefinitely in the gloom.

The earl began to manipulate the machinery, and the stone slab slowly ascended till its lower end rested upon the hearth again. Lorelie, attentive to his action, grasped with quick eye the principle of the mechanism. Such knowledge would be useful in the event of her having to return alone.

All communication with the outer world was now cut off. She was completely at the mercy of the two men, and though this was only what she had foreseen, yet none

The Viking's Skull

the less the sudden realization of the fact caused a certain chilling of her high courage.

The order of their march was now changed: they walked abreast: Lorelie in the centre, the earl on her right, Ivar, still silent, on her left.

Though apparently staring about with interest and curiosity Lorelie in reality never took her eyes from the earl. It might have been simply the effect of the flickering light, but in her opinion his face had an exultant and sinister expression. She became more than ever on her guard, and any sudden movement on his part caused her right hand to seek her dress pocket in which a loaded revolver lay concealed.

A steep descent of stone steps now yawned in front of them. With her left hand Lorelie drew her dainty skirts around her, and glanced in disgust at the black slimy ooze and the patches of fungous growth.

"These stairs look slippery," she murmured.

"A former lord of Ormsby broke his neck down these very steps," remarked the earl.

"I have no wish to imitate his feat," said Lorelie, drawing back a little. "Do you go first. If I slip I shall be but a light weight, whereas if you should fall upon me," she added, with a shrug of her shoulders, "there is no knowing what might happen."

The earl gave her a suspicious look as if detecting a hidden meaning in her words: then, compliant with her wish, he led the way down the steps. Lorelie came last, feeling more at ease in being at the rear.

The stairs terminated in the flagged flooring of another long passage, at the end of which was the crypt.

As Lorelie entered she could not repress a shiver, the atmosphere of the place striking her senses with a damp chilling effect.

Ivar, by aid of the light he had carried, proceeded to

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

kindle the lamp pendent from the roof, and every object in the chamber became clearly visible.

At a glance Lorelie took in the whole scene — the octagonal crypt, the black velvet curtains draping the alcoves, the massive oak table, and the four antique carved chairs : everything just as Godfrey had described it.

As her eye fell upon the silver lace edging the lower end of a curtain adjacent to the door, her face expressed satisfaction, a satisfaction that became instantly lost in a very different feeling : for there, on the floor by one of the alcoves, was a chest of cypress wood, an object she readily identified as the reliquary that had figured so conspicuously in Godfrey's narration. The lid stood erect and she noticed that the contents consisted of a whitish powder.

"*Quicklime!*" she murmured with a cold thrill.

Becoming doubly vigilant she sat down in one of the chairs and prepared herself for emergencies.

On the table stood a decanter partly filled with wine, and beside it some glasses. Observant of everything Lorelie saw that though the smooth surface of the table was overlaid with a coating of dust, the display of glass exhibited not a trace of it ; evidently the wine was of recent introduction — perhaps placed there specially for her use.

"What ! you have wine here ? Pour me out a glass, Ivar."

Speaking in the tone of a woman who suspects nothing she reclined in her seat in a graceful attitude, extending a glass towards Ivar, and watching him keenly from beneath the lashes of her half-closed eyes. Her husband, his face as white as a ghost's, filled her glass, and setting down the decanter, breathed hard. The earl looked on with seeming indifference.

The Viking's Skull

With steady motion Lorelie lifted the glass, taking a longer time over the action than was necessary, as if even the foretaste of drinking were a pleasure not to be curtailed. Ivar was watching her with an expression the like of which she had never before seen on his face.

Her lips touched the edge of the glass, and there rested a moment: and then, without having tasted the wine, she raised the glass and held it between her half-closed eyes and the lamp above, an action that displayed to the full the beauty of her rounded arm and bust.

"How bright and clear it is!" she murmured, in a softly modulated voice. "By the way," she added, suddenly opening her eyes wide, "what wine do you call this?"

"A choice vintage. Malvazia, one of the rarest of the Madeiras," replied the earl.

Lorelie lowered the glass quickly, in real or feigned disappointment.

"*O-oh!*" she murmured, pouting. "A pity — that! I cannot bear Malvazia: it always gives me the headache. I must refrain from drinking.—And yet," she added, inhaling the fragrance, "the bouquet is tempting."

She toyed a moment or two with the glass, as if about to drink, but finally set it down upon the table, glancing at the two men with a silvery laugh. Her radiant air contrasted strangely with the sombre spirit which seemed to enwrap both of them.

"This is a very pretty chamber," she said, poising her head upon her hands, and affecting to survey the crypt with interest. "Nothing very terrible about it, after all. I might have spared myself the letter to Dr. Rothwell."

"What is that?" said the earl, with a quick nervous start.

"*Peccavi!* I have done very wrong, I admit," said

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

Lorelie, with a sweet smile. "I have ventured to disobey your command that I should tell nobody of this, our midnight adventure: for, as one never knows what may happen when visiting the haunts of the dead, I could not refrain from communicating with Dr. Rothwell on the matter. He is aware of this visit of ours to the crypt. Commend my wisdom, my lord, in thus taking precautions to secure our safe return."

Never did human countenance change so quickly as did that of the earl at these words. He glanced at Ivar. Dismay was reflected in the eyes of each.

"Here is the note I received from him this afternoon," continued Lorelie imperturbably, drawing forth the communication and tossing it carelessly upon the table. "You observe his words. 'Dear Lady Walden, I give you my promise that if I do not meet you at the porch of Ravenhall to-morrow morning at eight, I will come and seek you in the vault.'"

"He would have some trouble in finding it," sneered the earl.

"Not at all. Dr. Rothwell knows his way to this crypt as well as you or Ivar. He made a secret visit here on April the tenth of this year, the night on which Ivar returned home from the continent."

"Godfrey *was* at Ravenhall that night," muttered the viscount uneasily.

"He was here — in this vault, I repeat, at three in the morning. And the scene he witnessed was past belief. It would do you good, Ivar, to listen to his story. It would really interest you; you, perhaps, more than any other person."

It is no exaggeration to say that at these words Ivar became green with fear. He turned his head from the earl in order to conceal his agitation. The secret which he had believed to be locked within his own breast was

The Viking's Skull

known to others — was being hinted at in the presence of his father, the very person from whom he most desired to conceal it. How much did Lorelie know? What would she be saying next? Words, perhaps, that would bring him to ruin.

“Ivar, I see, is persuaded of the truth of my statement. You are more sceptical, my lord, but you shall be convinced.”

She detached the velvet bow from her neckband and flung it lightly beside Godfrey's note.

“Cut the threads of that; unfold the velvet, and you will find that its shape corresponds exactly with the little rent at the foot of that curtain. It was Dr. Rothwell who cut off this piece of velvet, bringing it away with him to prove — if proof should ever be required — that he has stood in the secret crypt of the Ravensgar. Do you still doubt me, my lord, or do you require further proof?”

On the contrary he was so certain of the truth of her words that he did not attempt to verify them, but stood, fingering the velvet bow with a dark expression of countenance.

Looking upon Lorelie as an enemy to be silenced at all costs he had brought her to this vault intending that she should never leave it. Ivar was a reluctant accomplice, his reluctance arising not from any conscientious scruples, but from the dangerous consequences attending the commission of such a deed. The disappearance of the new viscountess on the second day of her coming to Ravenhall would be an event that could not fail to bring suspicion and inquiry in its train.

Lorelie had divined their plot, and having taken steps for its frustration, had fearlessly accompanied them to the destined scene of her death. And here she was, a slender, fragile woman, in a lonely situation, with no one to hear

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

her cry for help, in the presence of two men desirous of her death, and yet, thanks to her forethought, as safe as if attended by an armed escort.

Her calm air, her radiant beauty, added fuel to the earl's secret rage. If he had followed his first impulse he would have seized her in his arms and twining his fingers around her throat have silenced her forever. But prudence compelled him to refrain from violence. The thought of having to face on the morrow the stern inquiring eyes of Godfrey acted as a potent check.

Fortunately for himself he had not proceeded to the length of openly avowing his awful purpose: he was therefore free to deny it, if she had any suspicion, as he was strongly disposed to believe that she had. Besides, what mattered her suspicion? She had no real proof to offer the world. Opposed to her single testimony was the joint testimony of himself and her husband.

He began to breathe freely again. The matter might yet end well as regarded his own safety — the only consideration that troubled him.

Lorelie, knowing the cause of his mortification, sat at ease in her chair, secretly enjoying her triumph.

At last, feigning to be angry, she exclaimed:—

“How silent you are! Are you going to let me depart from this vault without enlightening me as to its mysteries? Come, Ivar, play the part of cicerone. Draw aside the curtain from each alcove, and give me the names and biographies of the confined dead. I am in an historic genealogic mood.”

Ivar, not knowing whether to obey, glanced irresolutely at his father.

“Gratify the curious fool,” the earl muttered moodily.

With an ill grace at having to obey the wife whom he hated, and troubled by a secret foreboding that his guilty secret was about to transpire, Ivar approached the alcove

The Viking's Skull

nearest the door, and, lifting the velvet drapery, disclosed a deep recess, the walls of which were pierced with niches containing coffins.

"This," he remarked sullenly, touching one, "is the coffin of Lancelot Ravengar, the first earl of Ormsby."

And so he proceeded from one alcove to another, giving the names of the dead peers, his amiability not improved by the caustic remarks made by Lorelie.

"A dull catalogue of nonentities, unknown to fame," she said, when Ivar had finished his recital. "But I observed that you entirely passed over the fourth alcove. Why? Raise the curtain and let me see what it contains."

With manifest reluctance the viscount lifted the drapery, revealing in the alcove a coffin on trestles.

"This is the coffin of Urien Ravengar, my grandfather."

"In saying that, you of course mean simply that that is the name on the plate."

"That coffin," broke in the earl in a harsh voice, "contains the body of my father, Urien Ravengar."

"I do not think so," replied Lorelie quietly.

In a blaze of wrath the earl turned suddenly upon Ivar.

"Fool! what have you been telling this woman?"

"I? Nothing!" replied the viscount, shrinking back. And seeing disbelief expressed on his father's face, he added, "Ask her: if she speak truth she will tell you that nothing relating to this coffin has passed my lips."

"Then how—how?" began the earl: then, breaking off abruptly, he turned to Lorelie with the question: "Tell me, then, what this coffin does contain?"

"That is what I wish to learn," she replied coolly. "It is my chief reason for visiting this vault."

"You will remain in ignorance."

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

“I shall depart enlightened. Was it not from that coffin, Ivar,” she said, turning to him, “that you took the golden vase you gave me some time ago?”

She was drawing a bow at a venture, but the arrow found its mark. The sweat glistened on Ivar’s forehead. He betrayed all the confusion of a guilty person. His father eyed him suspiciously.

“A golden vase!” he exclaimed with a bitter smile. “Ivar, I must look into that coffin!”

Thus speaking he made his way to the alcove where the viscount was standing. Moved by curiosity Lorelie also drew near.

“Take the screwdriver, and remove the lid,” said Lord Ormsby in a stern voice.

Sullenly and mutely Ivar proceeded to do his father’s bidding.

No one spoke, and nothing disturbed the stillness save the crisp revolution of the screwdriver. With folded arms and compressed lips the earl stood looking on, an expression on his face that boded ill for his son should he find his suspicion verified.

The last screw was loosed, and as Ivar raised the lid Lorelie’s eyes instantly closed, dazzled by a thousand rays of many-coloured light, shooting up in all directions from the coffin, like bright spirits rejoicing to be free.

Putting up her hand to shield her sight from the radiance she endeavoured to obtain a clear idea of what was before her.

The coffin, of more than ordinary size, was a veritable treasure-chest, filled to the lid with plate and precious stones, the latter forming by far the larger part of the contents.

Forgetful of her aversion to the earl, forgetful of her recent peril, forgetful of everything but the sight before

The Viking's Skull

her, Lorelie stood with parted lips and dilated eyes, spell-bound by the glittering array of wealth. Her knowledge of art taught her that the antiquity and workmanship of the ornaments far exceeded the intrinsic value of the materials composing them. There was a crucifix, formed from one entire piece of amber, the plunder of some Saxon monastery: an ivory drinking-horn, engraved with runic letters, that spoke of the old Norseland: a golden lamp, inscribed with a verse from the Koran, a relic of Moorish rule in Spain: rare coins, that had found their way from the Byzantine treasury. Every part of mediæval Europe had apparently contributed some memorial to this store.

But, as previously stated, the quantity of plate was small in comparison with the gems. It was these that riveted Lorelie's attention. Never in any collection of crown-jewels had she seen the equal of these stones for variety and size, for brilliance and beauty. The richest caliph of the East might have envied the possessor of such a store. It suggested a dream of the "Arabian Nights."

"Ah! you may well gaze!" cried the earl to Lorelie, in a fierce exultant tone. "Find me the man in Britain who owns such wealth as this! Take every object out of the coffin," he continued, addressing Ivar. "Lay each and all upon the table. Let Lady Walden handle them that she may realize the wealthy match she has made."

Lorelie quite understood the earl's motive in making this display. Since he could not get rid of her, his only other policy was to conciliate her. She smiled disdainfully to herself. It was not to her interest, however, to quarrel with him at present: she must simulate friendly relations till the purpose for which she had come to Ravenhall should be accomplished.

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

“Yes, let me see everything,” she said in seeming eagerness.

Drawing the table to the entrance of the alcove Ivar proceeded to empty the coffin of its contents. During this operation Lorelie’s surprise rose almost to fever-heat at sight of some of the objects drawn forth.

When the coffin had been emptied, the earl produced a pocketbook containing a list of the treasures.

“‘Article 1,’” he read out. “‘Ancient Norse funereal urn, of pure gold, set with opals.’”

The viscount handed a vase to his father.

“Safe, I see,” said the earl. “I have been unjust to you in thought, Ivar,” he continued, apologetically. “When your wife spoke of a golden vase given her by you, my thoughts associated themselves with this. I acknowledge my error.”

Ivar cast an anxious look at Lorelie, dreading lest her words should lead to the betrayal of his secret. But Lorelie said nothing, though in a state of extreme amazement and perplexity: for the jewelled vessel now in the earl’s hands seemed to be the very vase given to her by Ivar some weeks previously—the vase that had played so important a part in her hypnotic experiment with Beatrice.

On coming to Ravenhall Lorelie had left it behind her at The Cedars: how came it to be here in the vault of the Ravengars? Was it a replica? If so, it was certainly a marvellous imitation of the original, since she could detect no points of difference.

“Observe the lustre of the opals,” said the earl, his eyes gleaming with pleasure; and Lorelie perceived that his love of study, great though it might be, had not quenched in him the passion of avarice. “An interesting and precious relic of Norse antiquity, this!” continued the earl, tapping the urn affectionately. “It

The Viking's Skull

contains the ashes of Draco the Golden, the founder of our family. From the grey dust within this urn all we Ravengars have sprung."

The vase at The Cedars also held the remains of the same Viking, if the story told by Beatrice in her hypnotic trance was to be relied upon. The supposition that the ashes of Orm had been divided between two urns seemed absurd: and yet how otherwise was this mystery to be explained, unless indeed Ivar, unknown to her, had paid a visit to The Cedars, and having obtained the vase, had restored it to the place whence he had originally taken it. Unlikely as this last hypothesis might be, it seemed the only one capable of meeting the requirements of the case.

The earl, having carefully deposited the urn in one corner of the coffin, referred again to his catalogue.

"'Article 2. Norse altar-ring of pure silver, inscribed with runic characters.' Yes, this is it," he continued, receiving the article from Ivar's hand. "The ring of Odin, that figures in our armorial shield. Many a legend of blood clings to this relic. What a history it could unfold, were it but endowed with speech!"

The golden vase had puzzled Lorelie, but this silver relic puzzled her still more. She did not doubt that the object before her was the identical ring, the non-production of which at the trial of Eric Marville, was one of the points that had told against him. She knew the story of its theft from Mrs. Breakspear, and, like Idris, knew not whither it had vanished. Now, after all these years, it thus reappeared! By what circuitous route, through how many bloodstained hands, had it passed before regaining its ancient abode?

Mechanically she took the ring from the earl's hand. If this were indeed the very relic, there should be a black mark upon the inner perimeter of the ring. Upon ex-

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

aming it, however, she could discover no stain at all: the metal band was bright and unsullied.

Was this ring, like the vase, a replica: or was there truth in the ancient legend that the bloodstain would vanish when some one should meet with a violent end as an atonement for the slaying of the Norse herald? Certain it was that a death *had* occurred in connection with the finding of the treasure.

With a bewildered air she handed back the ring to the earl, who placed it within the coffin beside the vase, and turned again to his list.

“‘Article 3. A sapphire drinking-cup. Weight’— ah! look at this!” he cried, breaking off from his reading in an ecstasy of delight. “Look at it! Handle it! Admire it! Can the Dresden Gallery produce its like?”

A low and prolonged cry of admiration flowed from Lorelie’s lips. The object handed to her by the earl was a miniature goblet, the tiny bowl, stem, and stand being delicately sculptured from one entire sapphire. It was a work of art, as well as a splendid gem. With the delight of a child over a new toy Lorelie raised the gleaming brilliant aloft, placing it between her eye and the light in order to mark its lovely azure transparency. Its beauty was such as almost to reconcile her to her lot with Ivar. To think if she chose, she might in time to come be the joint-possessor of such a gem!

“A million of money would not buy that cup,” cried the earl, watching her look of admiration. “It belonged originally to the great Caliph, Abderahman the Second, and was taken by Draco and his Vikings at the sacking of the Moorish palace at Seville. It vanished from human ken, and has lain hidden in a night of ten centuries. The lapidaries of the present age scoff at its description in history, believing the gem to be the creation of Arabian fancy: but here it is, existing to-day, to confute

The Viking's Skull

their shallow scepticism. Were this gem known to the world it would take the title of 'The Queen of Sapphires.'"

Charmed beyond the power of words to describe, Lorelie turned the cup slowly round, flashing the light from a hundred facets: and then — and then — she made a discovery. A minute air-bubble was faintly visible in the crystalline azure!

She glanced at the earl. His triumphant face showed that he had not the least inkling of the truth. She looked at Ivar, who happened at this moment to be standing behind his father. The sudden change in Lorelie's countenance assured the viscount of the fact of her discovery: and now, he, the coward who had been willing to take her life, was appealing to her by gesture and expression to keep her knowledge a secret from his father.

For that which gave the earl such pride was in truth nothing but an artificial gem, a marvellous imitation of the real thing, but still merely a piece of coloured glass!

Lorelie became more perplexed than ever at this discovery. How came Ivar to know that the gem was false, and why was he so anxious to conceal the truth from his father?

Then in a moment everything became clear.

Always pressed for money, and precluded by his father's parsimony from obtaining it, Ivar had formed the plan of appropriating a certain portion of the plate and gems contained in the coffin. To secure himself from detection he had artfully replaced the originals by clever facsimiles, fabricated on the continent by goldsmiths and glass-workers of the class who would ask no inconvenient questions provided that they were well paid for their work. To obtain the necessary counterfeits Ivar

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

must have conveyed the originals to the continent, a very hazardous thing to do, seeing that if the earl had paid a visit of inspection to the treasure during his son's absence, discovery would have been inevitable. The counterfeits being completed, Ivar had brought them concealed in the reliquary to Ravenhall, and had transferred them to the coffin, his remark while doing so — the remark overheard by Godfrey — to wit, "I hope Lorelie will be satisfied," being doubtless drawn from him by the fact that Lorelie was often making monetary demands upon him, a fact which she herself would be the first to admit, though she little dreamed of the means taken by him to supply her costly tastes. She could not avoid the feeling that, to some extent, she was responsible for Ivar's peculations: and, therefore, compliant with his wish, she kept silent, and permitted the earl to remain in his ignorance.

The contents of the coffin were a mixture of the genuine and the spurious. The altar-ring was the genuine article: it would not have paid for the trouble of counterfeiting. The jewelled vase was spurious: on glancing again at this last, Lorelie wondered how she could have taken the metal for gold: it now seemed to her eyes merely like common bronze. The "sapphire cup" was but worthless glass: she almost sighed at the thought that the lovely original should have been exchanged for current coin of the realm. The selling of such a gem was an act little short of sacrilege.

"Well may you linger over it!" cried the earl, thinking that her long retention of the cup was the result of admiration. "Such a gem as that is too lovely for earth, too precious even for an empress to drink from."

"But not for a Ravengar, surely?" said Lorelie.

And taking up the decanter she filled the azure cup with wine, and held it out to him.

The Viking's Skull

“Drink, my lord,” she said smiling, and recalling his own words, “‘Tis of a choice vintage, one of the rarest of the Madeiras.’”

But from that cup the earl recoiled as from the summons of Death himself.

“Why, you start as though ’twere poison,” laughed Lorelie. “Will you not drink, Ivar?” she added, turning to the viscount and offering him the cup. “What! and do you, too, shrink from a few drops of innocent Malvazia? refuse the honour of drinking from the great Abderahman’s cup? the caliph’s own, veritable, genuine, historic cup! you understand?”

He did — fully. Stepping forward, she said in a fierce thrilling whisper: —

“How much is your life worth, if I let your father know that this cup is but a piece of coloured glass?”

It was not in Lorelie’s nature to take pleasure in another’s pain; yet on the present occasion the despair and fear expressed in Ivar’s eyes was a luxury to her, almost compensating for his attempt on her life.

“It was for your sake I did it,” he muttered with white lips.

Contemptuously turning away from him, she said: —

“Well, then, if neither will drink, I, too, shall refuse. I will imitate those excellent examples, my husband and father. Let us be classical and pour out a libation. Here’s to the great Archfiend himself, the author and giver of the treasure, for Heaven, I am convinced, has had little to do with it.”

She inverted the cup: but, either by accident or design, the greater part of the liquid fell in splashes upon her dress, very few drops reaching the floor.

* * * * *

On reaching her bedroom Lorelie’s first care was to lock the door: her next, to cut from her dress every por-

The Secret of the Funeral Crypt

tion stained with wine. These fragments of cloth she placed in a glass phial, steeping them in water. Then the spirit that had sustained her through the long and terrible ordeal gave way, and reeling forward she fell heavily across the bed.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CRANIOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT

IDRIS BREAKSPEAR strolled slowly to and fro beneath the lime-trees in the garden of Wave Crest, reading for the twentieth time a letter received by him the previous evening.

Accompanying the letter was a note worded thus:—
“The enclosed speaks for itself. Can you ever forgive me for my seven years’ silence?—LORELIE ROCHEFORT.”

The missive forwarded to Idris was her mother’s confession relative to the murder of M. Duchesne, a confession which, it need scarcely be said, overwhelmed Idris with amazement.

The hope entertained by him during so many long years was at last realized: it was now within his power to clear his father’s memory; but the knowledge brought with it as much pain as pleasure, for to establish his father’s innocence was to bring ignominy upon the name of the woman he loved.

A soft footfall attracted his attention, and raising his eyes from the letter he saw Lady Walden herself. Sadly and timidly she stood, obviously in doubt as to the sort of reception she would meet with. To face the reproachful eyes of Idris was a more trying ordeal than that of accompanying the earl to the terrible vault.

She was the first to speak.

“You are reading my mother’s letter, I perceive. You know now that it was my father and not yours that murdered Duchesne. I have come,” she faltered, “I have come to ask, yet scarcely daring to ask, whether you can

A Craniological Experiment

forgive me for maintaining silence hitherto. I have longed to tell you the truth, but have been afraid. Do not," she added, breathlessly, "do not reproach me. You cannot reproach me more than my own conscience has."

The look of sorrow in her eyes instantly effaced from Idris' mind all resentment for his father's wrongs. The oath sworn to his mother in childhood's days became forgotten.

"Lady Walden," he replied, "if there be anything on my part to forgive, I freely forgive. I cannot blame you for seeking to shield your father's name."

The look of gratitude that came over her face thrilled Idris, who would gladly have forgiven her ten times as much for such a glance as she now gave him.

She had expected to be treated with coldness, if not with anger by Idris, instead of which she received from him the same tender respect as heretofore. She trembled with secret pleasure to think that she still held a place in his regard.

"And now you know the truth, you will publish it to the world," she said.

"I think not," he replied, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. "No, I am sure I shall not."

"You will not redeem your father's memory from guilt?" said Lorelie, with a little gasp of surprise. "Why not?"

"Because the fair name of Lady Walden must not be darkened by the shadow of the past."

Her eyes drooped. She had no need to ask why he was desirous of shielding her name from reproach, knowing full well that it was from love of her.

"But this — this is not just," she said in a low voice.

"To proclaim the truth would injure the living," he replied, "without in any way benefiting the dead."

The Viking's Skull

"It is not right," she declared, "that your father and you should bear the stigma that belongs to me and mine. I will proclaim the truth myself."

"Lady Walden, if it be your desire to please me, you will maintain silence. But pardon my discourtesy, you are standing all this time."

He led her to a garden-seat, and took his place beside her.

"You once asked me," said Lorelie, "to let you read my father's correspondence. I have brought his letters with me. They are here."

She held out a packet of letters.

"Will you not read them to me, Lady Walden? You can then omit what you think necessary."

"I have no wish to conceal anything contained in them," she answered, placing the letters in his hand. "But before you read, let me forestall and correct an erroneous impression you may be likely to draw from them. Guided partly by these letters, partly by other considerations, I have, till a few days ago, entertained the belief that the Earl of Ormsby was none other than — your father, Eric Marville."

Despite his desire to be serious Idris could not refrain from smiling at this statement.

"And what has led you to discard this extraordinary theory?" he asked.

"I was glancing yesterday over a copy of an old French newspaper — *L'Étoile de la Bretagne* — in which is given a full description of your father as he appeared at his trial in the Palais de Justice. Now in this account Eric Marville is described as having very dark eyes, whereas Lord Ormsby's eyes are light grey in colour."

"Which deprives me of the honour of claiming an earl as my father," said Idris, with an air of mock disappointment.

A Craniological Experiment

"I do not think you will esteem it much of an honour when you hear what I have to say. But, first, will you not read these letters?"

Idris, though much surprised by her words, made no further comment, but turned to the correspondence of Captain Rochefort.

Lorelie had arranged the letters in chronological order, and Idris began his perusal, becoming more interested with each successive missive. When he had finished reading he looked extremely grave, and said:—

"The final letters, interpreted by what we know to have taken place within Ormfell, would almost seem to suggest—how shall I say it?—that your father was killed by mine!"

"That at first was my belief, but I know now it cannot have been."

"I trust that you are right. But why cannot it have been?"

"Beatrice in her hypnotic trance recognized the face of the assassin. But she has never seen either your father or mine. Therefore we cannot impute the murder to either of these."

"True!" replied Idris, with a sudden feeling of relief. "But tell me, Lady Walden, what face *did* she see, for I am convinced that you know."

"If," she replied evasively, "if we can discover the present possessor of the Viking's treasure, we shall obtain a strong clue to the assassin?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, then, the Viking's treasure is at Ravenhall, concealed in the secret vault."

And she proceeded to intensify Idris' surprise by relating the incident of her visit to the crypt, saying nothing, however, as to the earl's purpose in taking her thither.

The Viking's Skull

"Who placed the treasure there?" asked Idris.

"Four persons only have had access to this vault — the earl, Viscount Walden, the family solicitor, and the Rector of Ormsby. The two latter we can at once dismiss from our list of 'suspects.'"

Idris turned a startled face upon Lorelie.

"Surely you would not have me charge your husband — your father-in-law, with murder!"

"I strongly suspect the latter from the perturbed air manifested by him when I once hinted at my knowledge of the crime."

"The grave and dignified earl the author of such a deed! Impossible!"

"Not more impossible than that my own father should be a murderer!"

Idris started at her bitter tone. Truly the Fates had dealt hardly with her in the matter of kinsfolk. Those ladies of Ormsby who were disposed to envy Mademoiselle Rivière her new rank would have had little cause for envy could they have seen into her mind at that moment.

"I have found," continued Lorelie, "the very instrument with which the deed was wrought. It is here."

As she spoke she produced a jewelled hat-pin shaped like a stiletto, the steel blade being broken off short at the hilt.

"This belonged to the late Countess of Ormsby, in whose jewel-case it has lain for over twenty years: at least, so the old housekeeper declares. The blade was broken a short time before the death of the countess, and has never been repaired."

"Does the housekeeper give any account of how the steel came to be broken?"

"She tells a very significant story. The countess lost this stiletto when walking in the park one day. On dis-

A Craniological Experiment

covering her loss she immediately set the servants to look for it, but their search was unavailing. Next morning, however, the earl returned the hat-pin to the countess, saying that while taking a walk by moonlight he had found it in its broken condition.

“Now my belief is that the earl, having discovered that Ormfell was the site of a buried treasure, was proceeding thither at night, either alone or attended by a servant, for the purpose of opening the hillock, and while on his way through the park he chanced to light upon his wife’s hat-pin. Naturally he did not leave it lying upon the ground, but picked it up and placed it upon his person. And this is the weapon with which he attacked the other man, whoever he may have been, that was with him in the hillock. When the countess next morning received back her hat-pin from her husband, she little knew of the terrible use to which it had been put.”

“Your theory, if correct, proves that the deed was unpremeditated, otherwise the earl would have gone provided with a more efficient weapon. Do you know the date of the countess’s death?”

“She died in the autumn of ’77.”

“Then the crime must have taken place more than twenty-one years ago.”

Idris fell to thinking: and the result of his thought was that it would be an ungrateful task to bring to justice an aged peer for a crime committed more than twenty years ago. For all he knew to the contrary the deed might have been a case of justifiable homicide: the earl had perhaps been compelled to slay the other in self-defence. Besides, was he not Lorelie’s father-in-law? If ignominy fell upon the House of Ravengar it must fall likewise upon her. No breath of scandal must touch her name. Idris felt that his hands were tied: he could make no move in the matter.

The Viking's Skull

"We know the author of the deed, it seems," he murmured, "but the identity of the victim still remains a mystery. Who was he?"

"That is a problem I am trying to solve."

"And you say the Viking's treasure is in the crypt of Ravenhall? What is Lord Ormsby's object in keeping it concealed?"

"I can but guess. Treasure-trove, as you know, is the property of the Crown: therefore the earl, on finding it, was compelled to act circumspectly. The sudden acquisition of a vast quantity of plate and jewels might have given rise to awkward questions on the part of the steward, and especially on the part of Lanfranc, the Ravenhall solicitor, a man somewhat given to suspicion. The earl was therefore obliged to secrete his ill-acquired wealth: and this he did by placing it within one of the coffins in the crypt, gratifying his avarice by occasional visits of inspection. That is my theory, but of course I may be wrong."

"Mortifying that he should have to secrete it," remarked Idris, "when if the story of the runic ring be true, the wealth is his by hereditary right, as the eldest lineal descendant of Orm the Viking."

"Mr. Breakspear, your right to that treasure is greater than the earl's."

Idris was disposed to think so, too, in virtue of the long years he had spent in his attempts to decipher the runic ring. But this was not what Lorelie meant.

"Did you not notice what my father says in one of these letters, that Eric Marville claimed to be heir to a peerage?"

"It did not escape me. A surprising statement, if true."

"And the interest taken by your father in the runic ring, the heirloom of the Ravengars, proves his peerage to have been the Earldom of Ormsby."

A Craniological Experiment

"I fear you are dealing in fanciful hypotheses," smiled Idris.

"Your likeness to the family portraits of the Ravensgars is very remarkable."

"Mere coincidence."

"Not so. It is as certain that you are the rightful Earl of Ormsby as it is that the sun is shining."

"But how? In what way?" cried Idris, impressed, in spite of himself, by her air of conviction.

"That I cannot tell. I am trying to find out."

"I thank you, Lady Walden, for interesting yourself in my fortunes, but supposing that your surmise should prove correct — what then?"

"You will take the title and station that are rightfully yours."

"And, by so doing, deprive you of your position? No, Lady Walden, I cannot do that. If, as is implied by your words, you are seeking to prove that I have a claim to the Earldom of Ormsby, I would ask you to desist. Let matters be as they are. I am quite content to remain plain Idris Breakspear, and to leave to you the coronet of the Ravensgars. I do not believe that I am of noble birth, but in any case I will do nothing detrimental to your position."

"My position!" thought Lorelie, bitterly, as she recalled the attempt made upon her life. "Heaven help me to escape from my position! But," she said, aloud, "you are doing a wrong to your future wife. She may not appreciate the generosity that deprives her of a coronet."

"My future wife!" smiled Idris. "I shall never marry."

"And why not?"

"They do not love who love twice."

Lorelie, knowing his meaning, trembled, miserable and happy at one and the same time.

The Viking's Skull

"I am glad," he continued, "to have this opportunity of saying good-bye, Lady Walden, for I leave England soon, probably forever."

Lorelie received this news with dismay. Whether the feeling of pleasure derivable from Idris' friendship was a right or a wrong feeling she had never stopped to inquire, but it *was* a pleasure, and a sense of desolation fell upon her on hearing that she was to enjoy it no longer.

"A friend of mine has received a secret commission from the Indian Government to explore Tibet, the tour to include the forbidden city of Lassa. I have agreed to accompany him."

Lorelie was not ignorant of the perils attending such an enterprise.

"You will never return," she cried.

"So much the better," he answered quietly.

She glanced at him for a moment, and then her eyes fell, for she understood him. Involuntarily her mind was led to contrast the husband, who had sought to take her life, with Idris, so anxious to keep her name fair before the world: Idris, whose love was such that he was willing to sacrifice everything — even his life — for her sake! She could not hide the tears glistening beneath her lashes. The situation was a trying one for both, but fortunately at this moment a third person appeared on the scene.

Beatrice emerged from the garden-porch, and Lorelie, averting her head, essayed to remove the traces of tears from her eyes.

Beatrice gave her visitor a glad greeting, but there was a subdued air about her, due, as Lorelie knew, to sorrow at the thought of Idris' departure.

"Has Mr. Breakspear told you that he is going to leave us?" she asked, and receiving an affirmative, she

A Craniological Experiment

continued mournfully:—"As this is perhaps the last time we shall be together you must stay with us as long as you can. We are just about to have luncheon. Will you not join us?"

Lorelie readily assented, and went up-stairs with Beatrice to remove her hat and mantle.

"You are not looking very well, Lady Walden."

"No, Beatrice. And I shall never be well again."

Something in her tone went to Beatrice's heart: she guessed that Lorelie's unhappiness arose from Ivar's ill-treatment of her.

The beautiful face was suffused by an expression so miserable that Beatrice, the maiden of eighteen, involuntarily drew the married woman of twenty-three within her arms and kissed her consolingly, as though the viscountess were a little child. And Lorelie, glad of such sympathy, clung to Beatrice's embrace.

"Beatrice," she said presently, "if you should hear that I have slipped from a battlement on the roof of Ravenhall and dislocated my neck, or that I have lost my life by falling into the lake in the park, remember that this event will not have happened by accident."

"What do you mean?" gasped Beatrice, thinking that Lorelie was contemplating suicide.

"Let your brother say whether I am wrong. Did he analyze the contents of the phial that I sent him?"

"He said that the water contained—I forget how many grains of strychnine," replied Beatrice, innocently.

"Then I was right," said Lorelie, with a face as white as death. "O, Beatrice, the earl and Ivar tried to poison me!"

"Lady Walden, how dare you say that?" said Beatrice, with a burst of indignation.

It was against Ravengars that Lorelie's charge was

The Viking's Skull

made, and Beatrice suddenly remembered that she herself was a Ravengar. Bad as Ivar might be she could not believe him capable of murder: and as for the earl, had he not always treated her with kindness?

But when Lorelie began to relate the incident of her visit to the crypt, Beatrice's scepticism slowly vanished, and she listened with a growing horror upon her face. And when the story was ended, she sat cold and trembling, unable at first to speak.

"Are they aware that you suspected their design?" she asked.

"I do not think so. I continue to speak and act as if I have every confidence in them."

"How can you bear to live with them? What they have attempted once they may attempt again. How can you trust yourself at the same table with them?"

"By eating of the dishes of which they eat; they are not likely to poison themselves. I must remain at Ravenhall till I have accomplished my task."

"And what is that?"

"To obtain proofs of Mr. Breakspear's right to the earldom: for, Beatrice, I have reasons for believing that he is the rightful Earl of Ormsby."

And Lorelie proceeded to repeat the arguments she had addressed to Idris, with some others in addition.

"Have you told Mr. Breakspear this?" said Beatrice, breathless with excitement.

"Yes, and he refuses to move in the matter."

"But we will make him," cried Beatrice, impulsively. "We will persuade him to give up this mad journey to Tibet. Lady Walden——"

"Do not recall my unhappiness by using that name: besides it is not justly mine. Call me Lorelie."

"Lorelie, then. I will come to Ravenhall and live there with you."

A Craniological Experiment

Lorelie's smile was like sunlight sweeping over a dark landscape.

"If anything could make me happy it would be your daily companionship, dearest Beatrice."

"It is not safe for you to live alone at Ravenhall," continued Beatrice. "I will return with you to keep watch and ward over you. Together we will work and make what discoveries we can. If Idris really be the owner of Ravenhall we will do our best to establish him in his rights."

The light of justice shone from Beatrice's eyes. There should be a righting of the wrong. Since the earl and Ivar had not hesitated at murder, let them suffer the punishment due to their guilt by losing their rank and estates.

"And when that is done," said Lorelie, "it will be for me to retire to a convent, and for Idris to place a coronet on these tresses," she added, touching Beatrice's hair.

"Ah, no!" replied Beatrice, sadly. "He will not marry me. Idris never loved any one but you. It is impossible for him to have you, yet he will never love any one else."

Lorelie was touched to the quick by Beatrice's look of distress. She felt that if she herself had not appeared upon the scene, Beatrice might now be happy in the love of Idris.

"Beatrice, believe me, I would gladly die if my death would enable you to gain his love."

Beatrice did not doubt the sincerity of this assurance. Brave-hearted and generous the little maiden harboured no resentment against her rival.

"He will come to you some day," said Lorelie, kissing the other tenderly. "He has been with you long enough to know your worth. He will find a want of something in his life when he is away from you. He will begin to

The Viking's Skull

ask himself what it is. 'It is Beatrice,' his heart will answer: and he will return to seek you.'

Beatrice shook her head, refusing to believe in this bright forecast.

"Have you told Idris of the attempt made upon your life?" she asked.

"No."

"We shall be doing well not to tell him of it. He is hot-blooded where your welfare is concerned: his rage would lead him to horsewhip both the earl and Ivar, or to do something equally rash. It is for us to mete out the punishment. We will do it more circumspectly. We will lull them into a false state of security, and then, when they least expect it——"

What more she would have said was cut short by Godfrey who, standing at the foot of the staircase, asked whether he and Idris were or were *not* to have the society of the ladies at luncheon; and thus adjured the two went down to the dining-room.

Godfrey was much struck with Lorelie's pallid look, and determined, before letting her depart, to take a diagnosis of her state, and prescribe accordingly.

Though full of wonder when Beatrice began to tell him of her intention to live at Ravenhall as Lorelie's companion, he made no objection, surmising that there was a mystery somewhere, and that she had good reason for the course she was taking.

"I shall be sorry to lose you, Trixie," he remarked.

"It is only for a time," replied his sister.

"By the way," said Godfrey, turning to address Idris, "I attended an old gentleman yesterday, one enthusiastically devoted to botany, and a little 'touched,' I fancy, over his favourite pursuit. He told me among other matters that he had once sown some mandrake seeds on the northern side of Ormfell with a view of learning

A Craniological Experiment

whether the plant would outlive the rigours of our Northumbrian winter. Great was his indignation to find one day that the plant had been wilfully plucked up by the roots. I did not tell him that I could give the names of the guilty persons, but contented myself with suggesting that the renewal of his botanic experiment might have more success if confined to the limits of his own garden."

"Ah! then there is one mystery cleared up," observed Idris.

"But there are others," remarked Lorelie, "which you are leaving behind unsolved. Cannot you persuade Mr. Breakspear," she added, turning to Godfrey, "to abandon his expedition?"

"O, Idris will come back safely," cheerfully responded the surgeon, who did not view the enterprise with the same fears as the ladies. "He will return covered with glory. He will have added a valuable chapter to geographical science, and will of course write a book."

"Of surprising dulness," interjected Idris.

"Of surpassing interest," corrected Godfrey. "I wonder you never took to authorship, for you have what I classify as the literary head."

"Don't! My vanity is great enough already."

"Did you not know that Godfrey is an expert in phrenology?" asked Beatrice.

"Not till this moment. But the news comes very opportunely. Man, know thyself! Godfrey, give me an introduction to Idris Breakspear. Manipulate my cranium, and let me have a true account of my character. Be critical, and spare not!"

And Godfrey, responsive to Idris' humour, proceeded to make a study of his head.

"Take my note-book, Miss Ravengar," smiled Idris, pushing it towards her, "and record my wicked characteristics. Now, Godfrey, begin."

The Viking's Skull

"Amativeness," said the doctor, placing his finger-tips beneath Idris' ears, while Beatrice laughingly wrote the word.

"You begin alphabetically, do you?" remarked Idris. "Amativeness: that, being interpreted, meaneth love — of — of the ladies generally. That organ is very large, of course?"

"No. Fairly large."

"O, come, you must be making a mistake. Feel again! It's a libel to limit my amatory sentiment to 'fairly large' only."

"I put it down as seven," replied Godfrey.

"What's the highest figure to which you ascend?"

"Nine — in my system."

"And I do not attain the top figure? Can't you make it eight, or at least seven and three-quarters?"

"The pupil must not dictate to the master," said Beatrice.

"Combativeness," Godfrey went on, his fingers ascending slightly.

"Combativeness," repeated Idris: "readiness to fight for — for the ladies. Don't say that isn't large."

"It is. Very large indeed."

"Good! There may be some truth in phrenology after all. Put 'combativeness' down as nine, Miss Ravengar. Go on, Godfrey! Next item, please!"

So amid Idris' badinage Godfrey proceeded with his statements, all of which Beatrice laughingly wrote down. Presently a grave expression stole over Godfrey's face, and before he had ended his task the expression had become one of doubt and perplexity. Both Lorelie and Beatrice noticed it. Idris, however, was precluded by his position from seeing Godfrey's look.

"Well, now, this is very pleasant reading," said Idris banteringly, receiving his pocketbook from Beatrice, and

A Craniological Experiment

glancing over what she had written. "I feel as a returned spirit may be supposed to feel when he peruses the virtues inscribed on his tombstone and fails to recognize himself. Such a character as this, duly attested and signed 'G. Rothwell, M. D.,' ought to procure me a free pass to any part of Tibet."

He began to talk of his intended expedition, and a trifling argument arising between himself and Godfrey relative to some point of Tibetan geography, Beatrice, as if to settle the dispute, wickedly despatched Idris to the library for a book that she knew he would not find there.

As soon as he had vanished through the doorway she turned to her brother.

"Godfrey, why did you look so serious while studying Idris' head?"

"Did I look serious?"

"Did you look ——? Just listen to him, Lorelie! Don't equivocate. You have discovered something: I know you have. Something that troubles you. What is it? Didn't Idris' character impress you favourably?"

"Idris' character is exactly as I gave it."

"Then why look as if he were an ogre?"

"It is but twenty-four hours since I examined another head."

"Whose?"

"You shall learn presently. Here is the result of my study of '*Nemo*,' as I call him."

He drew out his own pocketbook and directed Beatrice's attention to a certain page headed "*Character of Nemo*."

Very much puzzled, Beatrice conned his notes, but had not proceeded very far before she snatched up Idris' pocketbook and began to compare the remarks in each.

"'Amativeness — seven. Combativeness — nine,'" she

The Viking's Skull

murmured, reading the list of characteristics. "Why, there is no difference between them," she exclaimed. "Idris and your '*Nemo*' have heads exactly alike."

"The very thought that struck me just now."

"Who is this '*Nemo*'?"

"That is what I wish to know."

"Didn't the man give you his name, then?"

"I didn't ask him for it."

"Why not?"

"He wouldn't have told me if I had."

"He wished to remain incognito?"

"He didn't give verbal expression to that effect in fact he had lost the power of speaking."

"Was he dumb, then?"

"Very much so."

"O, Godfrey, do be explicit, and speak so that we can understand."

"Truth to tell, the man was dead!"

Beatrice gave a little scream.

"And his head reposes in that cabinet," continued Godfrey.

"You mean the Viking's skull?"

"You've hit the mark."

"But what — what ——?"

"What made me desirous of learning the character of the man to whom the skull belonged? A passing whim — nothing more. As I was casually opening the cabinet yesterday the skull caught my eye. 'Come!' said I, 'let me see the sort of fellow you were when alive.' And this," added Godfrey, tapping his note-book, "this is the result. Idris spends long years in deciphering a runic inscription on an ancient ring: acting on the vague hints furnished by it he undertakes an expedition to Ormfell, obtaining as his reward a skull whose phrenological development corresponds exactly with his own.

A Craniological Experiment

He was quite right in his opinion that the Viking's tomb would contain a clue towards solving his father's fate, for it is my firm belief that the skull in that cabinet is none other than the skull of Eric Marville!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE VENGEANCE OF THE SKULL

VISCOUNT WALDEN'S twenty-first birthday was drawing near, and Ravenhall was making grand preparations for the occasion. Invitations were issued to the local magnates and their families — invitations eagerly accepted, for everybody was curious to see both the earl, who had so long secluded himself from society, and the new viscountess, whose secret marriage had invested her with a romantic interest. Entertainment of various kinds was provided, for the earl's guests, as well as for the tenantry of his estates, the day to terminate in a grand ball, preceded by the performance of a poetic drama, written by Lady Walden, and entitled *The Fatal Skull*, a drama in which the authoress herself was to take the leading rôle. The other *dramatis personæ* were drawn from a select circle of Ormsby society, and their frequent rehearsals filled Ravenhall with a mirth and a gaiety not known in that gloomy mansion for many years. Lorelie took upon herself the office of stage-directress, and flung herself heart and soul into the work. She was ably seconded by Beatrice Ravengar, who, to the surprise of everybody in Ormsby, had left her brother Godfrey in order to be the companion of the new viscountess. A number of carpenters and scene-shifters from London had transformed the great hall of the castle into a suitable stage and auditorium. Scenic artists were busy at the canvas. Money was freely lavished upon the appropriate theatrical costumes. A leading society-paper had asked for, and had obtained, the

The Vengeance of the Skull

favour of having a reporter present to record the day's doings; in short, everything had been done to ensure success, and the amateur actors looked forward to the event with a pleasurable zest.

The great day came at last, as sunny and fair as could be desired. The earl moved about among his guests and tenantry with a dignified courtesy, bestowing ' nods and becks and wreathed smiles ' on all sides, in a manner surprising to those who had hitherto regarded him as a sort of gloomy Manfred.

Ivar was on excellent terms with himself: he flirted with the ladies, and patronized the young men with a truly lordly air. A descendant of a noble house; heir to a splendid estate: husband of a wife whose loveliness and literary abilities were the theme of universal praise—what more could he desire? Indifferent himself to Lorelie's charms he was not displeased to witness the admiration they excited in others. She was a part of his property, as it were: it was but fitting that she should receive her tribute of praise along with the other items of the Ravengar estate.

Lady Walden made an ideal hostess, and the guests whispered in secret that if the rumour were true that her own family was not of the highest, her beauty and sprightliness amply compensated for the deficiency. From her manner one would have thought her the happiest lady in the county. Once only did she give evidence of the real feeling that lay masked beneath her pleasant exterior, and that was when the Mayor of Ormsby, standing upon the flight of steps leading up to the grand entrance of Ravenhall, read a long address to Ivar, congratulating him on the attainment of his majority, and expressing the hope that both the viscount and his lady might long live to enjoy their exalted rank. At this Lorelie's lips curved for a moment into a bitter smile, and

The Viking's Skull

she cast a significant glance at Beatrice, who was seldom absent from her side that day. To those who noted the smile it recurred with peculiar force upon the morrow.

With the coming of twilight Beatrice stole away from the company to a private portion of the park, taking her course towards a little gateway in the western wall. Near this gate was a wooden bench, and seating herself upon it she drew forth a telegram and glanced at the message it contained, which was singularly brief:—
“Will be at the place appointed by seven o'clock.”

The sender of this telegram was punctual to the minute. St. Oswald's Church clock was chiming the hour when there came a knocking at the wicket-gate. Instantly unlocking it Beatrice threw it open, and stood face to face with Idris Breakspear.

She greeted him with an air which Idris intuitively felt to be a foreboding of grave things.

“On the point of sailing for India,” he observed, “I received a letter from Miss Ravengar bidding me return at once to Ormsby. Such a message cannot be ignored, and therefore I am here. And the question is, ‘Why am I here?’”

“I have not sent for you without cause. It is your duty to follow me, to ask no questions, but to await developments.”

“And where are you taking me?” he asked, as she locked the gate.

“There!” exclaimed Beatrice, appealing to an imaginary audience. “His first utterance is a defiance of my orders. However, I will answer that question. You are coming with me to Ravenhall.”

Impressed by the oddity of her manner Idris made no demur but offered his arm and accepted her guidance.

Their way led by a private path amid dense shrubbery:

The Vengeance of the Skull

now and again through a long-drawn vista in the trees Idris caught a glimpse of the more distant portions of the park.

The dusk of a lovely summer's eve was descending upon the lordly terraces and verdant lawns of Ravenhall. Mellowed by the distance the music of a regimental band floated on the air. *Al fresco* dancing was taking place beside the margin of a grey-gleaming lake. Above was a sky of darkest blue: below, the myriad lanterns shining amid the dark foliage made the park appear like a scene from fairyland.

Idris contemplated the picture with mixed feelings. If—and it was a very great “if,” he admitted—Lorelie was right in asserting that he himself was the true Earl of Ormsby, then all this fair estate was really his. Well, he had resigned his claim in favour of Lorelie, and would not go from his word. But not till this moment did he fully realize the extent of the sacrifice.

“It is a gala day, I perceive,” he remarked. “I learned on my way from the station that Lord Walden has attained his majority. He has a splendid estate *in futuro*. He ought to be a proud man to-day.”

“He *is* proud, ignorant that, like Agamemnon, he is treading on purple to his doom.”

Idris was surprised at these words, surprised still more by the bitterness with which Beatrice emphasized them. What did this speech portend?

“You have been living at Ravenhall for the past two months, I understand?” he remarked, for want of something better to say.

“Yes, as Lorelie's companion. This is our last day here. Lorelie and I take our departure to-night.”

Idris was more mystified than ever. Beatrice smiled as if enjoying his perplexity.

They had now reached the western wing of the man-

The Viking's Skull

sion, and Beatrice, unlocking a small door, invited Idris to enter.

“Am I to be smuggled in?”

“Yes, for this once, Cousin Idris.”

“*Cousin* Idris,” he repeated, emphasizing the first word.

“Did I say ‘cousin’?” she asked, with a simulation of innocence. “Well, I won’t withdraw the term. Let it remain.”

Idris stared hard at her, trying to read her thoughts. If he were really a Ravengar it might be that he was cousin to Beatrice. Was it possible that she and Lorelie had obtained proofs of this? Nay, could it be true that he was really entitled to the earldom? Had he been summoned here by Beatrice to take part in some plot by which the earl should be made to confess himself a usurper? Full of wonder he silently followed his guide. They traversed several corridors and ascended two staircases without encountering any one, a fact which led Idris to believe that Beatrice had prearranged matters with a view to keeping his visit a secret. Opening a door in an upper corridor Beatrice drew him forward, remarking: “This is our destination.”

Idris, looking around, found himself in a dainty little chamber very like an opera-box in appearance, inasmuch as there was a sort of balcony on one side of it. Silken draperies prevented him from seeing into what this balcony projected, but from below it there came the subdued murmur of voices.

“We are here,” said Beatrice, “to view Lorelie’s tragedy. It is to be acted to-night, and in this little place you and I will be able to witness the play unseen either by actors or audience.”

Stepping forward she cautiously put the curtains aside, an action which disclosed the fact that they were standing

The Vengeance of the Skull

on an elevated balcony that projected into, and looked down upon, a grand Gothic hall, brilliantly illuminated with electric light.

Under the manipulation of carpenters and upholsterers the place had assumed a somewhat theatre-like aspect. The southern end of the hall was appropriated to the stage, which for the time being was hidden from view by the folds of a heavy curtain. The pavement of the body of the hall was covered with velvet carpeting. Fauteuils, lounges, seats of every description, were disposed here and there: and these were now becoming occupied by a number of fashionably-dressed ladies and gentlemen, the time fixed for the beginning of the performance being close at hand.

“ I daresay,” said Beatrice, “ you are wondering whether it is reasonable on the part of Lorelie and myself to stop your voyage and to summon you here merely to witness a play? The sequel will show. It is something more than a play that you are asked to witness: it is an experiment. If Lorelie were to choose a motto for her drama it would be the words of Hamlet:—

“ ‘ The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.’ ”

“ I am altogether in the dark,” said her companion, lugubriously.

“ Be patient, Cousin Idris, and you shall have light anon.”

“ Cousin Idris again! Come, if we really *are* cousins, I shall exercise a cousin’s privilege.”

So saying he stole his arm around her, and turned her pretty face upward to his own. And Beatrice, unable to escape, submitted her lips to his, laughing, yet feeling more disposed to cry, knowing full well that there was another whom he would much rather have kissed.

The Viking's Skull

She broke from his arms and essayed to hide her confusion in the study of a playbill printed on white satin. Of the *dramatis personæ*, four names only were familiar to Idris.

Rosamond (Queen of the Lombards) LADY WALDEN.

Alboin (King of the Lombards) LORD WALDEN.

Cunimund (King of the Gepidæ) DR. G. ROTHWELL.

Paulinus (a bishop) THE EARL OF ORMSBY.

“The earl among the actors?” cried Idris in surprise.

“The play, as an experiment, would be a failure without him,” returned Beatrice, oracularly. “To persuade him to take part in it was a matter requiring very delicate handling on the part of Lorelie and myself. But we have gained our end, you see.”

At this juncture there arose the twanging of violin-strings, the puffing of wind instruments, and other sounds preliminary to orchestral music. Then in a moment more the overture had begun.

Idris, having drawn a velvet lounge to a point convenient for obtaining a clearer view of the stage, seated Beatrice beside himself. They were almost screened from sight by the arrangement of the silken curtains, and by a profusion of flowers and fernery that decorated the exterior ledge of the balcony.

The overture was a really brilliant piece, but Beatrice appeared to give little heed to it.

“There was once,” she murmured, in a dreamy voice, “there was once a son, who at the age of seven years promised his mother on oath that when he became a man he would do his utmost to clear his father’s name from a false charge. The son attained manhood; the opportunity came for proving his father’s innocence, and what did the son do? Nothing! Absolutely nothing!”

The Vengeance of the Skull

“Would you have me darken Lorelie’s name?” asked Idris, with a slight touch of anger in his voice.

But without heeding this interruption Beatrice went on:—

“And therefore, as you have failed in your duty, Lorelie herself will perform the act of justice to the dead. At this very hour two leading newspapers—the one in Paris, the other in London—are setting up the type of an article entitled ‘The story of an almost forgotten tragedy,’ an article that will bear the signature of Lorelie Rochefort. To-morrow morning the world will learn that Eric Marville was innocent of the crime laid to his charge. And to-night, here, in this very hall, Lorelie hopes to prove who Eric Marville really was: and her experiment, if it terminate as she expects, will depress her fortune in just the same proportion as it will raise yours.

“And this she does by way of making atonement to you for her guilty silence in the matter of Eric Marville’s innocence. That silence was the only fault in a life otherwise noble and good; how good no one knows so well as myself. But see! the play is beginning.”

As Beatrice spoke, the music of the orchestra stopped with a sudden crash. The electric light was switched off, leaving the body of the hall in semi-darkness. The buzz of conversation ceased, and amid a death-like silence the curtain rose on the opening act of the tragedy of *The Fatal Skull*.

The first scene of this drama was styled on the play-bill, “An audience-chamber in the palace of Cunimund.”

Clad in barbaric splendour, and seated upon a canopied throne, was the royal Cunimund, in the person of Godfrey Rothwell. On each side of him stood armed warriors and venerable counsellors, among the latter being the earl himself in his character of Bishop Paulinus, a

The Viking's Skull

rôle for which his grave and dignified bearing seemed naturally adapted.

Idris gazed upon the earl with considerable interest, beholding him for the first time. This was the man whom Lorelie — oddly enough now it seemed — had identified with his own father! She had been compelled to admit herself in error, but was there truth in her other theory that the earl was the author of the deed done in Ormfell? He turned from the contemplation of this problem to listen to the words of the play.

The opening speech of King Cunimund, addressed to his followers, showed that he had assembled them for the purpose of giving audience to a herald from the Lombard king, Alboin. The messenger being admitted, demanded, on behalf of his royal master, the hand of Cunimund's daughter, the fair princess Rosamond. From the herald's address Alboin appeared to be a somewhat savage wooer, inasmuch as he was encamped with an army upon the frontier, prepared, in the event of refusal, to ravage the Gepid kingdom with fire and sword.

"It is for Rosamond herself to decide the question," was the just arbitrament of Cunimund, when the herald had finished his oration.

So a messenger was despatched off the stage to bring in the princess. Then, from the right wing, to the sound of music soft and sweet, Lorelie entered in the character of Rosamond, the limelight playing with enchanting effect over the curves of her graceful figure and over the silken sheen of her dress. In Idris' eyes she had never looked more lovely, her natural beauty being enhanced by the attractions of art. And Beatrice, watching his face, sighed, for she knew herself to be forgotten.

Idris had hoped to receive a glance from Lorelie on her entrance, but in this he was disappointed: her whole soul was evidently absorbed in the part she was playing.

The Vengeance of the Skull

With a half-smile upon her lip Rosamond listened while her father Cunimund briefly explained the purpose for which she had been summoned. Then, standing erect with girlish grace Rosamond pleaded, in sweet and maidenly language, not to be given up to the will of a king well known for his savage character. There was something so pathetic and touching in her appeal as she stood alone facing the rough warriors, that tears rose to the eyes of many ladies in the audience. It seemed not to be acting, but nature itself.

Tumultuous shouts from the Gepid warriors applauded Rosamond's decision, and the curtain descended upon an exciting tableau—the running to and fro of men, the buckling on of armour, and the giving of orders for the coming fray.

On turning to ascertain Idris' opinion of the first act Beatrice found him with a look of perplexity on his face.

“The earl! The earl!” he murmured. “Am I dreaming, or have I seen him before? His attitude in raising his hand to his brow recalls a gesture on the part of some one I have known in far-off times. In his voice, too, there is something familiar: it is like the echo of one heard in my childhood.”

Beatrice gave a faint cry of surprise.

“Lorelie was right, then, in her conjecture,” she said. “Yes: Cousin Idris, you *have* seen the earl before under very different circumstances from the present. Patience! you shall learn where ere long.”

Quickly the curtain rose upon the second act.

The scene represented the interior of a church by night. Lamps gleaming from lofty columns shed a solemn light around.

Rosamond was present with her maidens and a few armed attendants. Their words showed that the Gepid

The Viking's Skull

army had suffered defeat. Cunimund himself was dead — not killed in fair and open fight, but treacherously assassinated by the bishop Paulinus, who had gone over to the Lombard side in the midst of the battle, carrying with him the head of the fallen king, and securing by that gift the favour of Alboin. The Lombards were now marching upon the Gepid capital, and Rosamond was seeking to elude capture by taking sanctuary.

Vain hope! From without came cries, the tramp of warriors, the clang of arms. Torches gleamed through the windows of the church. Rosamond's attendants tried to bar the door: their feeble efforts yielded to the superior force of the foe, and the Lombards entered the church with Alboin at their head, the *rôle* of that king being sustained by Ivar. The sanctuary became the scene of an unequal combat. Soon the sword glimmered in the grasp of the last defender, and the triumphant and savage Alboin seized the lovely and shrinking form of Rosamond.

Not till Alboin had sworn to accomplish his purpose, with or without marriage, did Rosamond yield her reluctant assent to become his wife. The ceremony took place on the spot, Paulinus himself, the traitor-bishop, performing the marriage-rite.

Rosamond, half-fainting, was led by her attendant maidens to the altar, and holding Alboin's hand, was forced to utter the words of the wedding-ritual amid the rude shouting of the Lombard soldiery, one of whom carried the head of Cunimund affixed to the point of a pike.

Language fails to convey an adequate conception of the wild horror displayed by Rosamond at this juncture in being mated to a man she loathed, and by an ecclesiastic whose hands were red with her father's blood. In an agony of grief and rage she mingled the holy words

The Vengeance of the Skull

of the ritual with fierce "asides." She was no longer the sweet maiden of the first act, but a woman thirsting for vengeance.

It struck Idris that the situation of Rosamond offered an analogy to that of Lorelie herself in being wedded to an uncongenial consort and living in daily communion with a man guilty of bloodshed. Then slowly the belief came over him that this emotion on her part was not a piece of acting, but the real expression of her feelings. It was no mock princess that he beheld, breathing an imaginary hatred against stage-foes, but a wronged woman animated with a deadly purpose against her husband and her father-in-law. What had happened to transform Lorelie's sweet and gracious nature to this dark and vengeful mood?

"As I live," muttered Idris, when the curtain had descended upon the scene, "she is importing her own personal feelings into the piece. She hates the earl and Ivar, and is laying some snare for them."

"You have hit it," replied Beatrice. "This play is for their humiliation and ruin."

"How is it that her object did not reveal itself to them during the rehearsal?"

"Because she did not act then in the same spirit as now: and, moreover, she will insert some words not in the printed edition of her play in order to mark their effect upon the earl. There will be no need to ask what words, or for what purpose uttered: you will know as soon as you hear. See!" exclaimed Beatrice, in a voice trembling with suppressed excitement, "the third act is beginning."

As the curtain ascended again a murmur of admiration rose from the audience at the beauty of the tableau revealed to view. The scene represented the refectory of a palace, and was so arranged that the actual walls of the

The Viking's Skull

Gothic hall in which the audience sat formed the wings and rear of the stage scenery, thus producing an effect more realistic than could have been attained by painted canvas. A spacious and splendid arched casement facing the audience made a part of this refectory; the scene had been purposely timed with regard to the moon's course, and it was no mock planet, but the real silver orb of night that shone through the panes of stained glass from a sky of darkest blue. The moonlight without contrasted curiously with the glow cast by the lamps pendent from the vaulted roof of the supposed banquetting hall.

A feast was taking place, given by King Alboin to celebrate his victory over Cunimund. Historically speaking, the memorable and fatal banquet with which the name of Rosamond is associated, happened several years after the defeat of the Gepid king, but for the sake of dramatic effect Lorelie had represented it as the immediate consequence of that defeat.

Robed in purple, and with a jewelled diadem upon his head, sat Alboin, and beside him, and now his chief counsellor, the traitor-bishop Paulinus, whose episcopal attire was stiff with brocade and gems. Disposed along the board with picturesque effect were the Lombard chiefs and warriors, all arrayed in gleaming mail.

The royal table glittered with a profusion of plate. The shelves of a carved oaken sideboard were filled with a variety of golden and silver vessels. The stage twinkled with so many dazzling points of light that it became hurtful to gaze too long upon it. All the Ravengar heirlooms were being paraded in this banquetting-scene, probably to impress the visitors with the extent of the Ravengar wealth.

"Are those jewels, and is that plate real?" muttered Idris, examining them through a lorgnette.

"All genuine, and not stage-property. I was once

The Vengeance of the Skull

promised," murmured Beatrice in a dreamy manner, "I was once promised a moiety of that wealth. — I wonder, Cousin Idris, whether you will keep your word: for it is all yours, or soon will be."

Idris did not catch the last part of her utterance, but he had heard enough to understand whence came all this display.

"The Viking's treasure!" he cried in wonderment. "But that blue-gleaming cup that the earl is lifting to his lips! — that cannot be a sapphire: it must be coloured glass."

"It is a real gem, I assure you. Isn't it a lovely thing? There cannot be its equal in the wide world. And think of it! Ivar was on the point of selling it, and other rarities, but fortunately, Lorelie stopped him in time. But I'll reserve that story."

The walls of the supposed banqueting hall were hung with tapestry, sufficient in length to drape both the wings and the background. This arras, decorated with figures in needlework, was obviously very ancient, apparently one of the Ravengar heirlooms employed to give an air of antiquity to the refectory-scene.

It was somewhat difficult to obtain a clear view of this tapestry owing to the intervention of the banqueting-table and the picturesque figures grouped around it; but, bringing his lorgnette to bear upon such parts of it as were visible, Idris observed that one of its needlework pictures was subscribed with the words:— "ORMUS HILDAM NUBIT."

"Orm weds Hilda," he muttered. "By heaven! that is the tapestry that once decorated the interior of the Viking's tomb!"

"True," returned Beatrice. "But — we are losing the words of the play."

This last was quite true. So occupied had Idris been

The Viking's Skull

in contemplating the scenic effects, that he had not yet caught a word of the act then in progress.

Fixing his attention upon the dialogue Idris noticed that Alboin (or Ivar) was inviting his companions-in-arms to drink to their recent victory. While speaking he lifted on high his own goblet, a goblet of a very curious character, for it was fashioned from a human skull, supposedly that of the fallen Cunimund. The upper portion of the cranium had been sawn off, and being attached to the lower part by silver hinges, formed the lid of the grim drinking-vessel.

“Do you recognize the relic taken by you from Ormfell?” asked Beatrice.

“That cup is not the ‘Viking’s’ skull,” returned Idris decisively, as he surveyed it through his glasses. “Its colour is white: mine was a yellowish-brown. Now, notice the lid; it is lifted and turned towards us: it ought to contain a circular perforation, but there is none, you see. Trust me, I know my relic too well to be deceived.”

“You are quite right, Cousin Idris: the cup now in Ivar’s hands is *not* the ‘Viking’s’ skull; being merely the one used in the rehearsal. It would have been a betraying of her purpose had Lorelie employed the real relic, but it will make its appearance soon.”

She turned her attention to the dialogue again, and Idris did the same, wondering what the end of it would be.

Extending the skull-cup to a slave, Ivar-Alboin cried, in the words of history:—

“Fill this goblet to the brim: carry it to the queen, and bid her in my name drink to the memory of her father.”

The attendant poured wine into the cup and carried it off the stage for the purpose of presenting it to Queen Rosamond. And pre-informed by Beatrice Idris knew

The Vengeance of the Skull

that the goblet carried out would not be the same as that which would be brought in. Lorelie would enter with the identical skull taken from Ormfell. Why should this be? He awaited the sequel with breathless interest, an interest that would have been far more intense had he known with what person Godfrey had connected this same skull. But some things had been kept from the knowledge of Idris, and this was one of them.

The advent of Queen Rosamond was heralded by music of a singular character. The softer and more melodious instrument ceased, and there arose a threnody drawn entirely from violin-chords and from the metallic wires of the harp—a threnody that was staccato, shivering, weird. The faint whisperings which had been going on here and there among the audience instantly ceased: every one sat spellbound, thrilled with awe by that unearthly music, as if it were a prelude to the entrance of Death himself.

Idris recognized the air as the requiem that was never heard except at the death of a Ravengar. That it should now be played seemed suggestive of some coming tragedy. He learned from Beatrice that this requiem had formed no part of the rehearsals: and, indeed, the wondering looks interchanged among the amateurs on the stage showed that it came upon them as a surprise. Idris was not slow to mark the perturbed air of the earl-bishop. If it were Lorelie's object to unnerve him, she had to some extent succeeded.

Amid this eerie refrain Queen Rosamond slowly entered the banqueting hall, carrying in her hands the dread cup, the fatal skull of her father Cunimund. The eyes of every one, both on and off the stage, were riveted upon her movements. She had exhibited splendid acting in the two previous scenes; was she now about to surpass herself?

The Viking's Skull

She was robed in a vesture of violet satin, embroidered with gold, that shimmered as she moved; and in her flowing raven hair there gleamed an ornament that gave Idris a thrill of surprise, for he immediately recognized it as the stiletto hair-pin that had wrought the fatal deed in Ormfell.

By aid of the lorgnette he surveyed the object she was carrying. Yes: that golden-brown thing was indeed the 'Viking's skull,' set in silver, and mounted as a cup — a cup in appearance only, for the cranium was perfect and entire, and had not been fashioned into a lid.

Rosamond had entered through an arched door in the wall on the right-hand side of the stage. Ivar-Alboin's throne was on the extreme left, and therefore to reach him it was necessary to traverse the entire length of the stage.

Slowly, very slowly, she advanced with silent and majestic tread, holding aloft the fatal skull.

To Idris, the moment was one of thrilling interest. He felt that the crucial point of the experiment had come: the object for which Lorelie had caused her play to be staged was now about to be disclosed.

Not a word passed Lorelie's lips as she moved forward, the ghostly *tremolo* music going on all the time. She looked neither to right nor left: she had eyes for one person only, and that was the earl, and him she regarded with the air of a triumphant accuser.

And the earl, observant of her manner, and always suspicious of her since that memorable night in the vault, dreading lest she should have divined his purpose in taking her there, grew troubled. It began to dawn upon him that Lorelie had an ulterior purpose in staging her play, a purpose fraught with ill to himself. His eye rested on the skull she was carrying: he noted the difference, yet no inkling of her real aim entered his mind.

The Vengeance of the Skull

He stared at her, trying to read her thoughts : she returned his gaze : their looks became a silent duel.

At last she reached the place where Alboin sat. The shivering music came to an end, enabling her voice to be heard.

“ Ere I comply with my lord-king’s request,” she said, addressing Ivar, and using the words of the play, “ let me learn from whose skull I drink.”

She set the relic upon the table, keeping one hand over the cranium. Idris felt that she did this for the purpose of hiding the fatal perforation. But though her words were addressed to Ivar, she did not for one moment remove her eyes from the earl’s face.

“ It is the skull of thy late sire, the royal Cunimund.”

“ Not so, husband mine,” she cried, with a sudden change of voice that startled everybody present, actors and spectators alike, “ not so ! Let us leave acting and be real. — Tell me, my lord of Ravenhall,” she said, bending over the table and addressing the earl in a thrilling sibilant whisper that penetrated to every part of the hall, “ *tell me, whose skull is this ?*”

She withdrew her hand from the skull and pointed to the orifice in the cranium.

A strange gasp broke from the earl. He cast one glance of fear at Lorelie, and then sat with parted lips and dilated eyes staring at the thing before him. Lorelie’s significant manner, his own guilty conscience, the circular perforation in the occiput, were sufficient to tell him whose skull it was. In one swift awful moment he realized that his secret was known to the woman whom he had most reason to fear, and he intuitively divined that she was about to make it known to all present. And then ? He gasped for breath ; his throat seemed to be compressed : he twitched at it with his fingers as if to loosen some tightly-drawn noose.

The Viking's Skull

He knew now why she had shewn such persistency in urging him to take part in the play. "Only a minor part, a few words to utter, nothing more," had been her plea. He knew now why she had flattered, insisted, threatened: her motive was to surprise and confuse him: to entrap him into a confession by suddenly producing the skull before his eyes.

And she had nearly succeeded. Sudden amazement had almost wrung the secret from him. He compressed his lips tightly: he must not speak, lest by some incautious word he should betray himself. Silence! Silence! there lay his safety. With such cunning had he overlaid all traces of the crime that it could not be proved except by his own confession.

The audience, after a glance at the play-book, looked at each other in bewilderment, wondering why the viscountess had departed from the written words of her drama. Instead of playing as finely as heretofore she had actually committed the gross blunder of addressing the Bishop Paulinus as, "My lord of Ravenhall!"

Receiving no answer to her question, for the earl sat silent and motionless, Lorelie rested her hand upon the table, lightly shook the sleeve of her silken dress, and the next moment the runic altar-ring was sparkling on her wrist.

"By the sacred ring of Odin, stolen by you from Edith Breakspear, I adjure you, speak! Whose skull is this?"

Something like a groan issued from the earl's lips. So, his theft of the ring was likewise known to this terrible woman!—a theft committed so long ago that it had almost faded from his memory: and, lo! here the deed was, starting up to confront him after a lapse of twenty-three years!

For a moment he forgot his present position: the



The Vengeance of the Skull

stage, the lights, the audience, all were gone. He found himself again in that quiet twilight chamber at Quilaix; again he saw the sad eyes, the pale face of the woman from whom he had taken the ring: again her solemn utterance sounded in his ears: — “If it should bring upon you the curse which it has brought upon me and mine, you will live to rue this day.”

The voice of Lorelie speaking again, roused him from his reverie.

“By this hoarded treasure, gained at the price of blood, I adjure you, speak! Whose skull is this?”

Mechanically his eyes wandered over the festal-board with its array of plate and jewels. The splendid parade of wealth made his present position only the more ghastly. Like a spectre from the tomb Nemesis arose to mock him amid the very riches which his guilt had purchased.

A silence had fallen both upon actors and audience. They had begun to catch a glimpse of the true meaning of this strange tableau. As motionless as statues they sat: they scarcely breathed: it would have required an earthquake or the conflagration of the hall itself to have moved them.

In silent despair the earl looked around upon the array of still faces set with earnest attention upon him, and then he turned again to the skull. All lifeless as it was, it was victor over him to-day. It seemed to be grinning at him in conscious mockery. Powerless itself to speak it had found a mouthpiece, an avenger, in the person of Lorelie.

Why had he allowed this woman to leave the secret vault, where her life had been in his hands? He might have known that she would never rest till she had avenged herself upon him.

He looked into the depth of her dark blue eyes —

The Viking's Skull

eyes that were steeled to pity. "Like for like," they seemed to say: she would show him the same mercy that he would have shown her, though in truth, Lorelie thought not of herself, but of the dead Eric Marville, so cruelly wronged both by her father and herself: Eric Marville, who had generously refrained from claiming the peerage justly his in order that the present earl might enjoy it. And he had received his death-stroke from the hand of the very man whom he had benefited! Was this a case for pity!

"By yon tapestry, silent witness of the deed, I adjure you, speak! Whose skull is this?"

A portion of the arras within view of the earl was clutched from behind by an unseen hand, and was suddenly rent in twain from top to bottom with a sharp ripping sound: then came the fall of some dull body, (though nothing was seen by the audience), followed by a faint sighing like an expiring breath.

The earl shook convulsively. The very sounds that had accompanied the fall of his victim in Ormfell!

With slow motion Lorelie raised her hand to her head. The earl followed her action with his eyes, wondering what new terror was in store for him. Drawing the broken stiletto pin from her hair she placed the fragment of the blade within the orifice of the skull, where it remained, the jewelled hilt projecting above, and glittering with weird effect.

"By the very stiletto that let out the life of your victim, I adjure you, speak! Whose skull is this?"

She was determined to have her answer, and that openly.

In darkness and secrecy the deed had been wrought: amid brilliant light and before a crowd of hearers the truth should be proclaimed. Like some struggling victim in the torture-chamber, who, doggedly speech-

The Vengeance of the Skull

less, is forced onward to the rack that will soon wring the confession from his reluctant lips, so the earl, in dumb agony, felt himself drawn onward to tell the dread secret of his life.

The jewelled hilt of the stiletto protruding from the skull exercised a fascination over him : he could not take his gaze from it : like a gleaming eye it seemed to be commanding him to admit his guilt.

Idris, attentive to every variation in the face of the earl, saw that he was sinking into a cataleptic state. Unable to obtain the required confession in any other way Lorelie had resorted to her knowledge of hypnotism, and had found the earl powerless to resist her mesmeric influence.

“Speak ! Whose skull is this ?” she asked once more.

“*My brother's.*”

The earl spoke like an automaton, in a tone, cold, mechanical, passionless — a tone he maintained throughout the whole of his subsequent answering.

A wave of surprise passed over the audience. Till that moment it had not been known that Urien Ravengar, the preceding earl, had had more than one son.

“When did your brother die ?”

“Twenty-one years ago.”

“In what place did he die ?”

“In the interior of Ormfell.”

“How came he to die ?”

“*I killed him !*”

At this answer a thrill prevailed the assembly. Half-articulate screams arose from the ladies. From fair jewelled hands play-bills and books of the words slid to the floor. There they lay unheeded, being no longer required. The sham-tragedy was over : a new and un-

The Viking's Skull

rehearsed drama of real life was taking place before their eyes, and the audience bent forward to watch and to listen.

Ivar, with a troubled look, rose at this point and made an attempt to stay Lorelie's action.

"Let down the curtain," he cried to an attendant in the wings. "What devil's work is this?" he continued, turning fiercely upon his wife. "Let it cease! Restore my father to his normal state. You have mesmerized him, and, mistress of his mind, you are making him say whatever you wish. Do you think that any one here believes him?"

One word from her, one imperious gesture, one flash of her eyes, was sufficient to quell Ivar's opposition.

"*Malvazia!*" she whispered, pointing to the sapphire cup.

The viscount shrank back, knowing that the hour of his fall and humiliation was at hand.

"Let none intervene," said Lorelie, addressing her audience with quiet dignity.

And during the remainder of the scene there was neither movement nor sound on the part of the spectators, not even from Idris and Ivar, the two persons most interested in the dialogue.

In cold measured tones Lorelie proceeded with her merciless catechism.

"Was he a younger brother?"

"My senior by three years."

"Why was he not acknowledged by your father, the late earl?"

"He was the son of a secret marriage—a marriage with a village maiden named Agnes Marville."

"Where can the record of this marriage be found?"

"In the parish church of Oakhurst in Kent."

"Your father did not tell this Agnes that he was a

The Vengeance of the Skull

peer of the realm: and, as soon as a son was born, he deserted her: nay, more, while she was still living he made a second marriage, which, therefore, renders your own birth illegitimate. Is not this so?"

"Yes."

"When did the son of this Agnes discover that he was the rightful heir of Ravenhall?"

"On attaining manhood."

"What course did he take?"

"He wrote a letter to my father to the effect that as that father had repudiated him in infancy he on his part would accept the repudiation."

"And so, waiving his just rights, he went to live in Brittany under the name of Eric Marville. Why did you, too, leave England about the same time?"

"The letter written by Eric fell into my hands and caused a quarrel between my father and myself."

"Did you, when abroad, ever see your half-brother?"

"During his trial I stood among the spectators."

"Did you not make yourself known to him?"

"No, for I hated him."

"Did you show your hatred in any way?"

"I secretly promised his prosecuting counsel a large sum if he should secure a conviction."

"How long did you remain abroad?"

"Ten years."

"And by a strange coincidence on the very night of your return to Ravenhall your brother's yacht went down in Ormsby Race. You believed he had gone down with it, till ——?"

"Till he surprised me in Ormfell as I was in the act of removing the treasure."

"Let us hear what took place."

"We quarrelled. He had discovered the part I had played in the trial at Nantes, and also that it was I who

The Viking's Skull

had taken the runic ring from his wife. He threatened to assert his claim to the earldom, and so I struck him down with a stiletto hair-pin, the only weapon I had upon me at the time."

"How did you dispose of the body?"

"I left it, covered with quicklime, in Ormfell, so that, if ever discovered, it might be taken for the remains of some ancient warrior."

"Did your brother have any children?"

"One son."

"Who is, of course, the rightful earl of Ormsby. By what name is this son known?"

"Idris Breakspear."

Lorelie put no more questions. She had discovered what she wished. Light had been cast on dark places and all was clear. She had made her atonement to Idris: and, with a significant glance at the balcony where he sat, she waved her hand, and at that signal the curtain descended.

Ere the amazed audience had time to exchange remarks the earl's voice was again heard, proceeding from the other side of the curtain.

"What do you say, Ivar?" he cried, in wild staccato utterances. "I have accused myself . . . of murder? . . . That my title . . . and yours . . . are invalid? It is false! . . . Gentlemen, I am not responsible . . . for my utterances . . . This woman hates me . . . She is a hypnotizer . . . has taken my mind captive . . . made me say . . . whatever suits her purpose . . . Pay no heed to anything I have said . . . in this state . . . of——"

His utterance was checked by a fit of coughing, followed by a strange gasp, and then all was still.

The next moment one of the amateur actors appeared

The Vengeance of the Skull

at the side of the stage-curtain and beckoned to Godfrey, who, his part having ceased with the first act, had taken his place amongst the audience. The surgeon passed behind the curtain, then quickly reappeared.

“Get the company away as quickly as can be managed,” he whispered to the steward of Ravenhall, “the earl is dead!”

CHAPTER XX

FINALE

“THE earl dead!” murmured Beatrice in a tone of awe. “Death! *That* was no part of Lorelie’s design.” And, after a brief pause, she added, “It is the judgment of God.”

Awe-struck by the terrible ending of the play the whispering guests began a hurried departure. Idris, however, at Godfrey’s suggestion, remained behind.

The body of Olave Ravengar, *un-lawful* Earl of Ormsby, was carried to the chamber usually assigned to the lying-in-state of the dead lords of Ravenhall.

Having attended to this duty Ivar, passing through the entrance-hall, suddenly caught sight of Idris in conversation with Godfrey.

For a moment he stared superciliously at his rival.

“Impostor!” he muttered, with affected indignation. “John! Roger!” he continued, addressing two tall footmen who stood near, “put this fellow outside the park gates.”

“Perhaps,” said Godfrey, quietly, “as your title is at present in question, it will be well to wait till it be legally ascertained whether you have the right to give orders here.”

Ivar scowled, first at the speaker, then at the throng of mute and immovable servants, who showed little disposition to acknowledge his authority.

His mind reverted to Lorelie, the author of this, his downfall: had she chosen to keep his secret he might have retained his usurped rank. She should suffer for

Finale

this: she at least was his, if Ravenhall were not, and he would exercise his authority by applying a horsewhip to her shoulders. It would be a pleasure to hear her screams! Yes: he would do it, though his father were lying dead in the house. There was an additional pleasure in the thought that by subjecting Lorelie to indignity and humiliation he would be mortifying Idris.

"Where is Lady Walden?" he demanded, turning upon one of the servants. "I must," he continued, with an ugly smile at Idris, "I must have a word with her."

"Your wife — she repudiates the title of Lady Walden — is now at Wave Crest," replied Godfrey. "I am desired by her to state that you will never see her again."

"Indeed?" sneered Ivar, haughtily. "She shall return. A wife's place is by her husband's side."

"That sentiment comes with an ill grace from an adulterer who once offered his wife poison to drink," responded Godfrey.

Ivar grew white to the very lips.

"What do you mean?" he muttered. "O, I see! Some wild accusation of Lorelie's. Honourable gentlemen, ye are!" he continued, with an assumption of dignity that sat somewhat awkwardly upon him. "Honourable gentlemen, to corrupt a wife, and use her as a tool against her husband! This stage-play of to-night, this hypnotizing of my father's mind, this forcing him to utter whatever you wish, has been very finely arranged on the part of you all. It is a plot to deprive me of my rights. You shall hear what my solicitor has to say on the matter. It is one thing to claim an estate, and another to make good the claim."

"Quite so," replied Godfrey, who acted as spokesman for Idris, since the latter was too much bewildered by the novelty and strangeness of his position to say any-

The Viking's Skull

thing: "quite so. And therefore we have invited your solicitor to an interview with us to-morrow morning at ten o'clock in the library, when I trust you will be present, for we shall offer you abundant proofs of our position."

On the following morning Ivar repaired to the library, where he found the late earl's solicitor in company with Idris and Godfrey.

Ivar was well aware that Idris was the rightful heir of Ravenhall. His only hope was that the other might find it impossible to prove the legitimacy of his title. But in this he was quickly doomed to disappointment.

With a face that grew darker and darker he listened to the evidence that had been accumulated by the joint labours of Lorelie and Beatrice. The prior and secret marriage of the old earl, Urien Ravengar, with the village maiden, Agnes Marville: the birth of a child named Eric, together with Idris' legitimate filiation to the latter, were all clearly set forth.

The lawyer was at first disposed to be sceptical, but became fully convinced in the end.

"I fear it is of no use to dispute the evidence," he whispered to Ivar. "Contest the claim and you're sure to lose. Better to appeal to the generosity of your new-found cousin and heir, and try to come to some monetary arrangement with him."

Ivar sat for a few minutes in moody silence. Then, looking up and scowling at Idris, he muttered:—

"If I've got to give up Ravenhall, I may as well go at once. I won't be beholden to that fellow for a roof."

"Surely you will remain till your father's funeral shall have taken place?" said Idris.

"Damn the funeral!" muttered the late viscount, savagely. "What good shall I do myself by waiting for

Finale

it? Will it bring the governor back to life? I'll not stay here to be pitied, and jeered at, as the discoroned viscount. You killed my father by your wiles. You yourselves can now bury him."

And with these words he passed through the doorway and was gone: and even the coroner's summons failed to secure his attendance at the inquest held upon the body of the earl. Lorelie was present, and, after giving her evidence, quietly withdrew, accompanied by Beatrice.

But when Idris, a few hours later, called at Wave Crest, he was met on the threshold by Beatrice with the tidings that Lorelie had left Ormsby.

"Where has she gone?"

"Indeed I do not know," replied Beatrice, who looked the picture of grief. "She would not tell me her destination or plans. I did my best to persuade her to stay, but in vain."

* * * * *

A year after Lorelie's disappearance there occurred in a society-paper a paragraph relative to an event which, however melancholy in itself, could scarcely be viewed by Idris with any other feeling than that of satisfaction. This event was the death of Ivar, who was said to have been carried off by fever in an obscure lodging in London. Inquiries on the part of Idris proved that the story was true: and he found, moreover, that Ivar, in his last hours, had been nursed by a lady whose description answered to that of Lorelie.

The forgiving and generous disposition evinced by this act did but endear her the more to Idris.

But where was she? He was certain that she loved him. Why then did she continue to hide herself?

All attempts on his part to trace her failed completely:

The Viking's Skull

and a haunting fear seized him that she had retired for life to the seclusion of a French convent.

Two years went by, and Idris had almost given up the hope of ever seeing her again, when, passing one afternoon by the Church of St. Oswald, he heard the sound of its organ.

Attracted, partly by the music, partly by the thought that it was in this church that he had first set eyes upon Lorelie, he entered the Ravengar Chantry, and sat down to listen.

Something in the style of the music caused a strange suspicion to steal over him. He rose, walked quietly forward, and gazed up at the organ-loft.

The musician was Lorelie!

Screening himself from view he waited till she had finished her playing: waited till she had dismissed her attendant-boy, and then quietly intercepted her as she was passing through the Ravengar Chantry.

She started, and seemed almost dismayed at seeing him.

"I—I did not know you were at Ormsby," she murmured. "I thought you were on the Continent."

"Lorelie, where have you been so long?"

"I have been living in the south of France for the past two years. A few days ago a longing came upon me to see Ormsby once more, and ——"

She ceased speaking, and her eyes drooped as Idris gently held her by the wrists.

"And now that you *are* here," he said, "do you think that I shall ever let you go again? Lorelie, you know how much I love you. Why, then, have you avoided me? But for you I should not now possess a coronet: is it not fair that you should share it?"

"No: Idris, this must not be," she murmured, gently essaying to free herself. "There is one who loves you better than I — one more deserving of your love."

Finale

“ And who is that ? ”

“ Beatrice.”

“ And is it on her account that you have absented yourself so long, willing to sacrifice your own happiness to hers? Lorelie, you are too generous. Beatrice is indeed a charming and pretty maiden, and had I never seen you I might perhaps have loved her. I had the conceit that she might be growing fond of me, so I took steps to cure her of the fancy.”

“ How ? ” asked Lorelie, with wondering eyes.

“ By showing her that there are much finer fellows than myself in existence. With Godfrey’s consent I took her to London. At Ormsby I was a hero in her eyes, for there were few here with whom she might measure me : but in London it was different. ‘ Pretty Miss Ravengar ’ became quite an attraction in Society. Eligible young men surrounded her, eager for a glance and a smile : and — well — to make my story short, next spring we shall have to address our little Trixie as Lady St. Cyril. She will have half the Viking’s treasure as her dowry. And so, you see, my sweet countess —— ”

Their lips drew near and met in one long, clinging kiss.

In the circle of Idris’ arms Lorelie found a refuge from all her past troubles. Fair and clear before her the future lay like a sunny sparkling lake with one barque gliding over it : Idris was the steersman, and she had nothing to do but to lie back on silken pillows, still and happy, and float wherever he chose to direct.

THE END

By the Author of "The Viking's Skull"

THE SHADOW OF THE CZAR

By JOHN R. CARLING

Illustrated. 12mo. \$1.50. *Fifth Edition*

"An engrossing romance of the sturdy, wholesome sort, in which the action is never allowed to drag," (*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*) best describes this popular novel. "The Shadow of the Czar" is a stirring story of the romantic attachment of a dashing English officer for Princess Barbara, of the old Polish Principality of Czernova, and the conspiracy of the Duke of Bora, aided by Russia, to dispossess the Princess of her throne.

It is not an historical novel—the author makes his own events after the manner of Anthony Hope, and the *Boston Herald* is of the opinion that it "excels in interest Anthony Hope's best efforts." "Rarely do we find a story in which more happens, or in which the incidents present themselves with more suddenness and with greater surprise," says the *New York Sun*.

"Mr. Carling has a surprising faculty of making it appear that things ought to have happened as he says they did, and as long as the book is being read he even succeeds in making it appear that they did happen so," says the *St. Louis Star*.

"The Shadow of the Czar" fairly captivated two countries. In England the *Newcastle Daily Journal* says it "transcends in interest 'The Prisoner of Zenda.'"

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS
BOSTON, MASS.

A Stirring Tale of the Plains

THE RAINBOW CHASERS

By JOHN H. WHITSON

Author of "Barbara, A Woman of the West," etc.

Illustrated. 12mo. \$1.50

Full of the atmosphere of the West, with a cowboy, land speculator, and lover for its hero, Mr. Whitson's new novel, without being in the least a copy, has many of the attractions of Mr. Wister's hero, "The Virginian."

"The Rainbow Chasers" is a virile American novel and treats of the elemental forces of Western life and the results of the great fever of speculation in land. The prairies and forests of the West are the scenes which the author has chosen for a novel which is full of interest and strength.

The characters of the story are vigorous men, men with red blood in their veins, men of action who build up new communities.

A New Romance by the Author of "The Shadow of the Czar"

THE VIKING'S SKULL

By JOHN R. CARLING, author of "The Shadow of the Czar,"

etc. Illustrated. 12mo. \$1.50

Mr. Carling has written a spirited story of love and adventure, with an ingeniously constructed plot, which tells how Idris Marville, true Earl of Ormsby, recovered a treasure hidden by one of his progenitors,— a Viking of the Ninth Century,— and how he cleared the memory of his father, who had been wrongfully convicted of murder. There are many powerful scenes in the book and abundant love interest. The whole story is exceptionally strong, dramatic, vivid, and interest-compelling.

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS
BOSTON, MASS.

The Story of a Man's Triumph over the Flesh

THE WOOD-CARVER OF 'LYMPUS

By MARY E. WALLER, author of "A Daughter of the Rich," etc. Illustrated. 12mo. \$1.50

The hero of Miss Waller's new story is one of the most powerful and original characters portrayed in recent fiction. Hugh Armstrong, used to a busy out-of-door life, in felling a tree meets with an accident and loses the use of his limbs. At first he finds it impossible to adjust himself to his shut-in life, but a friend suggests wood-carving to him. Through work and love a great change comes over him, and the author has portrayed to us in a powerful manner Armstrong's salvation. The scenes are laid in the Green Mountains of Vermont.

A New Novel of Present-Day Virginia Life

WHERE THE TIDE COMES IN

By LUCY MEACHAM THRUSTON, author of "Mistress Brent," "A Girl of Virginia," etc. Illustrated.
12mo. \$1.50

In her new story Mrs. Thruston portrays a heroine as charming as her delightful "Girl of Virginia." The scenes of the novel are laid at Norfolk and Portsmouth, and the vicissitudes of the Southern vegetable farmer, who depends on the irrepressible negro, are strongly pictured. The novel is a genuine love-story with a touch of politics, and the Southern atmosphere is delightfully unhackneyed.

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS
BOSTON, MASS.

The Story of an American Woman's Summer Abroad

A WOMAN'S WILL

By ANNE WARNER. Illustrated. 12mo. \$1.50

A brilliant and entertaining love-story is this, narrated almost wholly in dialogue, the hero being a German of rank, and a famous violin player and composer, and the heroine, an American widow, whose marriage had been an unhappy one. The charm of the story is in the skilfully drawn characters, the bright dialogue, and the realistic painting of the scenes in which the events take place, Munich, Zurich, and Lucerne.

A Tale of Norway in the Tenth Century

THE NORTH STAR

By M. E. HENRY-RUFFIN. Illustrated. 12mo. \$1.50

This Viking romance is a tale of love and adventure with King Olaf Tryggveson for the hero. The story opens with a scene at a fair in Ireland, where Olaf meets a beautiful Irish princess, and later changes to Norway, where Olaf returns to be received as King. Such history and legend as have come to us of that time furnish fertile imagination a frame for stirring incident and rapid action.

By the Author of "The God of Things"

THE EFFENDI

By FLORENCE BROOKS WHITEHOUSE. With illustrations 12mo. \$1.50

The Prologue of this engrossing romance of the Soudan deals with the siege of Khartoum and the death of the hero, Gordon, and the Epilogue with the retribution which England exacted from the Arab hordes. Between the two is placed a dramatic story of love and adventure.

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS
BOSTON, MASS.

University of California
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1388
Return this material to the library
from which it was borrowed.

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 046 085 7

