

EDGAR SALTUS

THE MONSTER

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The Monster

I

When the clergyman had gone, the bride turned.

Before her was an open window before which was the open sea. In the air was a tropical languor, a savour of brine, the scent of lilies, the sound of mandolins that are far away. Below, in the garden, were masses of scarlet, high heaps of geranium blooms. A bit beyond was the Caprian blue of the San Diego Bay. There, a yacht rode, white and spacious. The yacht belonged to her husband who was beside her. She turned again and as passionately he embraced her; she coloured.

For the moment, as they stood there, they seemed so sheerly dissimilar that they might have come of alien races, from different zones. He, with his fair hair, his fair skin, his resolute and aggressive face, was typically Anglo-Saxon. She, with her delicate features, her dense black hair, and disquieting eyes, looked like a Madrilene Madonna – one of those fascinating and slightly shocking creations of seventeenth-century art that more nearly resemble infantas serenaded by caballeros than queens of the sky. There was a deeper contrast. He appeared frankly material; she, all soul.

Leisurely she freed herself.

“One might know,” she began, then paused. A smile completed the sentence.

He smiled too.

“Yes, Leilah, one might know that however I hold you to me, I never can hold you enough.”

“And I! I could be held by you forever.”

On the door came a tap, rapid and assured. A page entered, the preoccupation of the tip in his face, in his hand a platter of letters.

The man, taking the letters, dismissed him.

“Miss Ogston,” he continued. “From your father, confound him. It is the last time he will address you in that fashion. Miss Ogston,” he repeated. “From the Silverstairs, I fancy. Gulian Verplank. There is but one for me.”

He looked at his watch. “The launch from the yacht will be here shortly.”

“When do we start?”

“Whenever you like. The Marquesas will keep. Bora-Bora will be the same whenever we get there. Only – ”

“Only what?”

“I am in love with you, not with hotels.”

“Let us go then. There will be a moon to-night?”

“A new one, a honeymoon, a honeymoon begun.”

“Gulian! As if it could end!”

In pronouncing the “u” in his name her mouth made the sketch of a kiss.

“You would not wish it to?” he asked.

“When I die, perhaps, and even then only to be continued hereafter. Heaven would not be heaven without you.”

She spoke slowly, with little pauses, in a manner that differed from his own mode of speech, which was quick and forceful.

Verplank turned to the letter that had been addressed to him, and which he still held. Without opening it, he tore it into long, thin strips. It was, he knew from the imprint, a communication of no importance; but, at the moment, the action seemed a reply to her remark. It served to indicate his

complete indifference to everything and everyone save her only. Afterward, with a regret that was to be eternal, she wished he had done the same with hers.

Yet, pleased at the time, she smiled.

“Gulian, you do love me, but I wonder do you love me as absolutely as I love you?”

Verplank, with a gesture that was familiar to him, closed and opened a hand.

“I do not know. But while I think you cannot love me more wholly than I love you, I do know that to me you are the unique.”

Leilah moved to where he stood.

“Gulian, and you to me. You are the only one.” She moved closer. Raising her hands, she put them on his shoulders. “Tell me, shall you be long away?”

“An hour or two. Apropos, would you care to leave before dinner?”

“Yes.”

“We will dine on board, then. Is there anything in particular you would like?”

“Yes, lilies, plenty of lilies; and pineapples; and the sound of your voice.”

Lifting her hands from his shoulders to his face, she drew it to her own. Their lips met longly. With the savour of her about him, Verplank passed out.

Idly Leilah turned. Before her the sea lay, a desert of blue. Below, on the beach, it broke with a boom in high white waves which, in retreating, became faintly mauve. The spectacle charmed her. But other scenes effaced it; sudden pictures of the Marquesas; the long flight southward; the brief, bright days; the nights that would be briefer still. Pleasurably for a while these things detained her. Idly again she turned.

On the table were the letters. One was from an intimate friend, Violet Silverstairs, a New York girl who had married an Englishman, and who since then had resided abroad. The other was – or appeared to be – from Matlack Ogston.

Matlack Ogston was Leilah’s father. That a father should write to a daughter is only natural. But that this father should write surprised her, as already it had surprised Verplank. When he mentioned whom the letter was from she had thought he must be in error. Now, as she opened it, she found that he had been. Her father had not written. The envelope contained a second envelope addressed to another person. This envelope had formerly been sealed and since been opened. It held three letters in an unknown hand.

She began at one of them. More exactly, she began, as some women do begin, at the end. The signature startled. At once, as she turned to the initial sentences, she experienced the curious and unenviable sensation of falling from an inordinate height, and it was not with any idea that the sensation would cease, but rather with the craving to know, which in certain crises of the emotions becomes more unendurable than any uncertainty can be, that she read the rest of the first letter; after it, the second letter, and the third.

Then, as truth stared at her and she at truth, so monstrous was its aspect that, with one shuddering intake of the breath, life withered within her, light vanished without.

When ultimately, without knowing who she was; when, conscious only of an objective self struggling in darkness with the intangible and the void, when then life and light returned, she was on the floor, the monster peering at her.

She disowned it, disavowed it. But beside her on the floor the letters lay. There was its lair. It had sprung from them, and always from them it would be peering at her, driving her mad with its blighting eyes, unless —

She got on her hands and knees, and from them to her feet. Her body ached from the fall, and her head was throbbing. With the idea that smelling salts, or some cologne water which she had, might help her, she went and fetched them from an adjoining room. They were not of much use, she found, though presently she could think more clearly, and in a little while she was considering the possibility that had loomed.

In certain conditions the soul gets used to monsters. It makes itself at home with what it must. Her soul, she thought, might also. But even as she thought it, she knew she never could. She knew that even were she able to succeed in blinding herself to this thing by day, at night it would crawl to her, sit at her side, pluck at her sleeve, wake her, and cry: “Behold me!”

It would cry it at her until she cried it at him. Then inevitably it would kill her.

She had been seated, bathing her head with cologne. Now fear, helplessness, the consciousness of both possessed her. They impelled her to act. She stood up. She looked about the room. Filled with flowers and sunshine, it said nothing. Beyond was the sea. It called to her. It told her that in a rowboat she could drift and be lost. It told her that that night she could throw herself from the yacht. The blue expanse, the high white waves, the little mauve ripples invited.

The room, though, with its flowers and sunshine, deterred. To throw herself from the yacht meant that she would have to wait. It meant more. It meant that she would have to see him. It meant that she would have to feign and pretend. These things she could not do.

There remained the rowboat. Yet, in some way, now, the sea seemed less inviting. At the thought of its embrace and of its depths she shrank. To die, to cease any more to be, to succumb like the heroines of the old tragedies to fate, at the idea of that, her young soul revolted. There must be some other course.

She looked from the window. Beneath, before the ocean, a motor was passing. The whirr of it prompting, flight occurred to her, an escape to some spot that would engulf her as surely as the waves. Hesitatingly she considered it. But there was nothing else. Moreover, if she were to go, she must go at once.

She turned, crossed the room, stooped, gathered the letters, and seated herself at the table. There she put the letters in another envelope which she addressed to Verplank. While writing his name, her hand trembled, it shook on the paper drops of ink. These she tried to blot, and made a smear.

Trembling still, she got up, went to the telephone, and attempted to speak. At first, too overcome to do so, she leaned against the wall. It did not seem possible that she could do this thing. But she must, she knew. At last, with an effort, she spoke.

“When does the next train leave San Diego? One moment. Have my servants sent to me; my servants, yes, and – and order a motor.”

Again she leaned against the wall. The room had become intolerable. Into the languors of the air a suffocation had entered, and it was unconsciously, in a condition semi-somnambulistic that she found herself considering the pink of the ceiling, then the rose-leaves woven in the green of the carpet, the dull red of the table-cover, the darker red of a tassel, the tall vase that stood on the table and in which were taller lilies.

There, beneath them was the monster. Its vibrations, disseminating through the room, were silhouetted on the walls. She could not see them, but she could feel them. They choked her.

But now her servants appeared. Nervously, with an irritability so foreign to her, that they eyed each other uncertainly, she gave them hurried commands. These obeyed and the porters summoned, she passed, choking still, from this room, the secrets of which the walls detained.

It was perhaps preordered that they should do so. Long later, in looking back, she realised that destiny then was having its say with her, and realised also why. At the time, however, she was ignorant of two incidents, which, after the fashion of the apparently insignificant, subsequently became the reverse.

One incident had the porters for agent; the other was effected by a maid who supervened. The porters, in removing the luggage, collided with the table. The inkstand, the tall vase with the taller lilies, were upset; the vase, spilling water and flowers, fell broken on the floor; from the stand, ink rippled on the red of the cloth, on the darker red of the tassels, on the envelope which Leilah had directed to Verplank. These things, a maid, summoned by the crash, removed.

When Verplank returned, the table was bare.

He did not notice. What he alone noticed was Leilah's absence. She is below, he told himself. Then precisely as she had summoned her servants, he summoned his.

"Roberts," he said presently to a man. "Find Mrs. Verplank. Then get my things together. We start at once."

For a moment the man considered the master. At once civilly but stolidly he spoke:

"Mrs. Verplank has gone, sir."

Verplank, who had turned on his heel, turned back.

"What?"

"The hotel is full of it, sir. When I found that Mrs. Verplank was leaving, I –"

"What!" Verplank, in angry amazement, repeated.

"Mrs. Verplank is taking the limited, sir. It was the clerk who told me."

Then, for a moment, the master considered the man. At the simple statement his mind had become like a sea in a storm. A whirlwind tossed his thoughts.

But Leilah was still too near, her caresses were too recent for him to be able to realise that she had actually gone, and the fact that he could not realise it disclosed itself in those words which all have uttered, all at least before whom the inexplicable has sprung:

"It is impossible!"

"Yes, sir, it does seem most unusual."

Verplank had spoken less to the man than to himself, and for a moment stood engrossed in that futilest of human endeavours, the effort to read a riddle of which the only *Œdipus* is time.

At once all the imaginable causes that could have contributed to it danced before him and vanished. He told himself that Leilah's disappearance might be an attempt at some hide-and-go-seek which shortly would end. But he knew her to be incapable of such nonsense. Immediately he decided that his servant was in error, and that she was then on the yacht. If not, then, clearly she had gone mad, or else —

But there are certain hypotheses which certain intellects decline to stomach. Yet the letter from her father recurring to him, he did consider the possibility that she might have gone because of some secret of his bachelor life. Anything may be distorted. Unfolded by her father, these secrets, which in themselves were not very dark, might be made to look infernal, and could readily be so made by this man who was not only just the one to do it, but who would have an object in so doing. Always he had been inimical to Verplank, and this, the abandoned bridegroom then felt, not on his account, but because of his father.

The latter, Effingham Verplank, had been a great catch, and a great beau. His charm had been myrrh and cassia – and nightshade, as well – to many women, among others to an aunt of Leilah, Hilda Hemingway, whose husband had called him out, called him abroad, rather, where the too charming Verplank waited until Hemingway fired, and then shot in the air. He considered that the gentlemanly thing to do. He was, perhaps, correct. But perhaps, too, it was hardly worth while to go abroad to do it. Yet, however that may be, the attitude of the injured husband, while no doubt equally correct, was less debonair. He obtained a divorce.

The matter created an enormous scandal, in the sedater days when New York society was a small and early family party and scandals were passing rare. But, like everything else, it was forgotten, even, and perhaps particularly by the parties directly concerned. Hemingway married again; the precarious Hilda married also; the too charming Verplank vacated the planet, and his widow went a great deal into the world.

This lady had accepted the scandal, as she had accepted many another, with a serenity that was really beautiful. But, then, her seductive husband had always seemed to her so perfectly irresistible, so created to conquer, that – as their son afterward found it necessary to explain – it no more occurred to

her to sit in judgment on his victims, than it occurred to her to sit on him. With not only philosophic wisdom, but in the true spirit of Christian charity, she overlooked it all.

The culminant episode in the matter – the death of the volatile Verplank – took place at an hour when his son was too young to be more than aware that his father had been taken away in a box. Leilah was even less advanced. It was years before she learned of her aunt's delinquencies. When she did, that lady had also passed away, as had previously passed a child of hers, one that, perhaps, did not belong to her first husband, and, certainly not to her second, the result being that, in default of other heirs, she left a fortune to Leilah, whose mother had left her another.

When her mother died, Leilah was in the nursery. Her father, who thereafter abandoned her to servants and governesses, she seldom saw. When she did see him, he ignored her completely. It was a way he had. He ignored also and quite as completely the son of the deadly Verplank.

To make up for it, or it may be to make trouble, the boy's mother never regarded Leilah otherwise than with that smile of sweet approbation with which she gratified all the world – all the world, that is, save those only who were not in hers. Among the gratified were the Arlington girls, two beauties, of whom the elder, Violet, was Leilah's closest friend.

It was at Newport, at Violet's wedding to Silverstairs, a young Englishman who had followed her from Europe, and who at once took her back there; it was at this ceremony, in which Leilah participated as bridesmaid, and Verplank as best man, it was then that both became aware of a joint desire. It seemed to them that they were born to love each other, to love always, forever. Forever! – in a world where all things must end, and do. But the eagerness of it was upon them. Leilah wrote to her father. Verplank wrote to him also.

Matlack Ogston ignored Verplank's letter as invariably he had ignored Verplank. His daughter's he promptly returned. Across it was scrawled one word. That word was No.

Interests more commonplace had meanwhile transported Verplank from Newport to San Francisco. Informed of the veto, which to Leilah was an incentive and to him an affront, he had wired her to meet him at Coronado, this resort in Southern California which together they had been preparing to leave.

The night previous, on a yacht chartered at the Golden Gate, Verplank had arrived. It was by train, the next morning, that Leilah had come. The wedding followed. Before them lay a world of delight.

This was hardly an hour since. Now, like a bubble, abruptly that world had burst.

Yet why?

In that query was the riddle which impotently Verplank was trying to solve. With a clutch at a possible solution, he turned to his servant:

“Roberts, get a motor. If Mrs. Verplank is not on the yacht, I will take a special, and follow her.”

“Yes, sir. Shall you wish me to go with you?”

“No, stay here until you hear from me. At any moment Mrs. Verplank may return.”

But Leilah did not return. Nor did the special, in which Verplank followed, overtake her. The first intelligence of her that reached him was the announcement of her engagement to another man.

II

In Paris, many moons later, an Englishman, Howard Tempest, looked in, at the Opéra, on his cousin, Camille de Joyeuse. This lady, connected by birth with Britannia's best, and, through her husband, with the Bourbons, delighted the eye, the ear, and the palate. In appearance, she suggested certain designs of Boucher; in colouring and in manner, the Pompadour. Admirable in these respects, she was admired also, for her gayety, her tireless smile, and her chef. She had one of the best cooks in Paris – that is to say, in the world. Her husband, the Duc de Joyeuse, harmonised very perfectly with her. He had a head, empty, but noble, an air vaguely Régence. A year younger than herself, Time had had the impertinence to whiten his hair. The duchess was forty-two. Those unaware of the fact fancied her twenty-eight. The error greatly gratified this lady, who, familiarly, was known as Muffins.

One evening in May, Tempest entered her box, saluted her, examined the house, and, as, in a crash of the orchestra, the curtain fell, seated himself, in response to a gesture, beside her.

Camille de Joyeuse turned to him, and with that smile of hers, said: "Do not fail to come on Sunday, Howard. There is to be a Madame Barouffska, whom I want you to meet. She was formerly a Mrs. Verplank. Barouffski is Number Two."

"Verplank! Barouffski! What barbarous names!" Tempest exclaimed. He had vivid red hair, violent blue eyes, and a great scarlet cicatrix that tore one side of his face. In spite of the severity of his evening clothes, he looked rather barbarous himself. "What was she, a widow?"

"Yes, but with no tombstone to show. It appears that she was in love with Verplank for years, married him one minute and left him the next."

Tempest stifled a yawn. "How extremely fastidious!"

"She ran away, got a divorce, met Barouffski and married him."

"Very honourable of her, certainly. From what pond did you fish her?"

"The Silverstairs'. Violet Silverstairs is an American you know –"

"Know! I should say I did know. Though, if I did not, I would take my oath to it. It's got so a fellow can't stir without running into one of them. How does Louis like her?"

Louis was the duke.

The duchess displayed her beautiful false teeth. "Oddly enough, when he was in the States, he went hunting with her Number One."

"In the Rockies?" Tempest, with sudden interest, inquired. "In the Dakotas?"

"I fancy so. It was a place called, let me see; yes, Long Island, I think. I remember, he said it was very jolly."

Tempest tossed his red head. "Her Number Two, I suppose, is that chap I have seen at the Little Club. The Lord knows how he got there. He looks like a thimblerrigger."

The duchess raised her opera-glass. "Possibly. Nowadays, so many men do, don't you think? There is Marie de Fresnoy with the Helley-Quetgens! You will have her next to you on Sunday, Howard. Do not lacerate her tender heart."

At the suggestion, Tempest made a face. His expression amused Camille de Joyeuse. Indulgently she added: "To make up for it you shall take Madame Barouffska out."

But now the curtain was rising. The clear brilliance of the house faded into a golden gloom.

On the Sunday following, when Tempest reached the Cours la Reine, in which his cousin resided, there was a motor before the perron, and from it a woman was alighting. As rhythmically, with a grace that is rare in women who are not ballerines, she mounted the stair, Tempest had a vision of a figure, tall and slight, of a mass of black hair, and of a neck emerging from ermine. In the anteroom above, while a servant took from her her cloak and another received Tempest's hat and coat, he saw that she was extremely beautiful.

Immediately a footman, throwing open a door, announced: “Madame la comtesse Barouffska!” He added at once: “Lord Howard Tempest!”

In this marriage of their names they entered a drawing room in which were the Joyeuses, the Fresnoys, the Silverstairs; others, also, who momentarily were indistinguishable. The room – large, wide, high-ceiled – was decorated gravely, with infinite taste. Beyond it, a suite of salons extended.

Camille de Joyeuse, advancing to meet her guests, presented Tempest to Mme. Barouffska.

In a voice which, if a trifle high, was fluted, the duchess added:

“My dear, this cousin of mine has a terrible reputation, and that, I am sure, will commend him to you.”

With the semblance of a smile, Mme. Barouffska replied:

“You know I am never quite able to decide just what construction to put on your remarks.”

“Put the worst, put the worst!” answered the duchess, whose costume left her splendidly nude. From a billowy corsage her shoulders and bust emerged as though rising through foam, while the light gold tissue of her gown accentuated the royal outlines of her figure.

Leilah Barouffska, slenderer, taller, wholly in white, contrasted ethereally with her. Turning to Tempest she said:

“Lord Howard, I have heard so much that is interesting about you.”

“Not from Muffins, then.”

“Yes, but also from Silverstairs. He told me that you are the best gentleman jockey in England and a Sanskrit scholar besides.”

“Oh, I can straddle a horse, if it comes to that, but otherwise he exaggerates. He has caught that from his wife – unless it happens to be from her sister.”

At mention of the girl, Leilah, who had been looking across the room, turned to Tempest again. In looking she saw this young woman whose allurements – and possibilities – were generally regarded as excessive. Recently she had become engaged – perhaps for the tenth time. Coincidentally was the announcement that she was going in for light opera. Now, in reference to her, Leilah said:

“You have met Aurelia, then?”

“I found it very difficult not to.”

“And this young Lord Buttercups to whom she is engaged, is he nice?”

Tempest adjusted his monocle. “Very. A trifle wrong in the upper story. So was his father. So was his grandfather. A fine old English family.”

Faintly, as before, Leilah smiled. “I understand that Aurelia is studying for the stage. Such a queer idea, don’t you think – for an American heiress, I mean.”

Tempest, extracting his eyeglass, nodded. “Nowadays, unless an idea is queer, it can hardly be called an idea at all. But I am glad this young person is studying something. When she went to school she must have been taught everything which it is easiest to forget.”

A servant announced:

“His Excellency, Mustim Pasha!”

The man who entered was short and stout. He had a full black beard, and the appearance, slightly Hebraic, which Turks possess. After M. de Joyeuse had greeted him, he saluted the duchess.

Beyond, on a sofa, Violet Silverstairs sat talking to the Baronne de Fresnoy, a young woman who looked very much as might a statuette of Tanagra, to which Grévin had given two big blue circles for eyes, and a small pink one for mouth, but a statuette articulated, perhaps, by Eros, and costumed, certainly, by the Rue de la Paix – though a shade less artistically than Lady Silverstairs, who always seemed to have just issued from some paradise inhabited solely by poet-modistes, and who, in addition, possessed what Mme. de Fresnoy lacked, a face delicately and rarely patrician.

Adjacently was her sister, Aurelia, a girl with a face like an opening rose, and a frock of such astonishing simplicity that it looked both virginal and ruinous. This young person had the loveliest

eyes imaginable. In them and about an uncommonly bewitching mouth was an expression quite ideally ingénue which, when least expected, it amused her to transform into one of extreme effrontery.

On one side of her was Lord Buttercups, an English youth, small, snubnosed, stupid. On the other lounged a Roman, Prince Farnese, a remarkably fine-looking pauper.

Turning from the girl's sister to the Turk, the young baroness called:

"Here, Musty, come and make love to us."

The Asiatic was about to abandon Mme. de Joyeuse, when doors at the farther end of the room were thrown open, and the duchess put a hand on his arm.

At table, Tempest, who had taken Leilah Barouffska out, found his seat indicated beside her. At his left was Mme. de Fresnoy, whom he detested. He turned to the American. At the moment some preoccupation, a nostalgia or a regret, contracted the angle of her mouth. The contraction gave her the expression which those display who have deeply suffered either from some long malady or from some perilous constraint.

Mechanically, Tempest considered a dish which a footman, his hands gloved in silk, was presenting. When he again turned to the American, it was as though a curtain had fallen or risen. Her face had lighted, and it was with an entirely worldly air that she put before him this unworldly question:

"Do you believe in fate?"

Tempest laughed. "Not on an empty stomach. I believe then in nothing but virtue."

Leilah put down her spoon. "It seems to me that our lives are sketched in advance. It may be that we have the power to amplify incidents or to curtail them, but the events themselves remain unchanged. They are there in our paths awaiting us. Though why they are there –"

As was usual with her, she spoke with little pauses, in a voice that caressed the ear. Now she stopped and raised the spoon, in which was almond soup.

Tempest took a sip of Madeira. "A pal of mine, a chap I never met for a number of reasons, though particularly, I suppose, because he died two thousand years ago, well, he told me that we should wish things to be as they are. I have no quarrel with fate. But if you have, or do have –"

A maître d'hôtel, after presenting a carp that had been arranged as though swimming in saffron, was supervising its service.

"Padapoulos," exclaimed the young Baronne de Fresnoy, whom the sight of the fish had, perhaps, excited, "Padapoulos told me that he dined best on an orchid soup, a mousse of aubergine, and the maxims of Confucius."

"Padapoulos," the legate of the Sublime Porte gravely commented, "is a poet, and a Greek. Add those two things together, and you get – you get –"

"Nothing to eat!" the young baroness, with an explosion of little laughs, threw at him. "Musty!" she cried. "Whom were you with at the Variétés last night? I saw you. Yes, I did. Oh, Musty, who would have thought that you would be unfaithful to me!"

"These Roumis!" the Turk mentally exclaimed. "If a wife of mine talked in that way I would have her impaled."

Beyond, across an opulent bosom, de Joyeuse and Silverstairs were talking sport. They delighted in things that men have always loved, the pursuit of prey, the joy of killing, the murderous serenity of the woods.

Farther up was Aurelia. As before, she had Buttercups on one side, Farnese on the other. She poked at the former.

"That horrid de Fresnoy woman is trying to flirt with you, Parsnips. Now, don't deny it. I don't blame her. You are too good-looking. When we are married – if we ever are – I'll make you wear a veil. You sha'n't go out except in a closed carriage. Yes, and with some big, fat, strapping woman to look after you."

Beatifically the youth considered her. "Couldn't you do that?"

Delicately Aurelia raised a fork. "I shall have my own affairs to attend to." For a second she nibbled. "I have a few on my hands as it is."

Buttercups stabbed at his plate. "I, too, may have business of my own."

"Business! Business!" The girl repeated. "You are so commercial just like all the nobility. If you were not a peer you would be mistaken for one. It's quite painful."

"That may b-be," Buttercups spluttered. "But this idea of yours of going on the stage is quite as p-painful to me."

He hesitated, then, as though uttering a great moral truth, threw out:

"It's so dreadful to have your name in the papers!"

"And still more dreadful not to!" the girl threw back. She turned to Farnese. "You do nothing but eat!"

With large, melancholy, inconstant eyes the Italian looked at her. "It is my one consolation since you became engaged to that imbecile."

Aurelia pecked at her food. "One always feels quite safe with an imbecile, and that is so restful. Try it and see."

"I'd like to try it with you."

Aurelia put down her fork. "Am I your idea of an imbecile? You are flattering, if insincere."

Again the Roman covered her with his eyes. "It is rather difficult to be the one and not the other. But I am perfectly sincere in saying that you are my idea of perfection."

"Thanks, but, then, you are not mine."

"And might one ask what yours is?"

Dreamily, with an air of innocence that was infinite, Aurelia looked at him. "You will think it childish of me, perhaps, but, like all young girls – like all young and inexperienced girls – I have an ideal. A mere maiden's fancy, no doubt, and yet one which I cherish so. It is a vision which at times I have of a blind man, a deaf mute, a divine creature, invalid and octogenarian, who would not know what I did and would not care."

Pausing, she dropped her eyes and sadly shook her head. "You will tell me that he don't exist."

"He might be manufactured," Farnese cheerfully replied.

Then he, too, paused, drank of the wine before him, and, perhaps stimulated by it, whispered: "Believe me, I feel as though I could cut my throat for you."

Maliciously Aurelia looked up. "When a man does not feel that way he has no feeling at all. One might even say that he is quite heartless."

Across the table, Tempest, turning again to Leilah, said: "Monsieur Barouffski is not here tonight."

At the remark, instantly in her face its former expression of constraint appeared.

"No, he is to join us later."

At the other end, where the duchess sat, everybody was laughing. The lady had been giving an account of a recent bankruptcy, that of Lord Auld Reekie.

"Heavens!" Violet Silverstairs exclaimed. "What will become of Bobbles!"

Bobbles was Lady Auld Reekie, a fair young craft of light timber and many sails.

Camille de Joyeuse, summoning her diligent smile, replied: "She will go into the hands of a receiver."

Another jest followed, and presently, in the contagion of it almost the entire table joined.

The delicately toxic fare, the slightly emotionalising wines, loosened tongues, robbing them of discretion, and, before the servants, as though the latter were deaf and dumb, hosts and guests revealed their naked minds.

"It is rotten to talk in that way before these men," Tempest exclaimed. "They get their wages with lessons in anarchy thrown in. It's too much."

"I had not heard," Leilah replied. "I was thinking of that friend of yours whom you never met."

Tempest laughed. "The one who said we should wish things to be as they are? Ah, well! I am afraid I am not up to that yet."

"Nor I. But who was he, if one may ask? Not Aristotle?"

"No, but, by the way, do you know whom Aristotle is supposed to be, or rather to have become? Herbert Spencer! An occultist told me. He told me also such a curious story. You have heard, have you not, of Apollonius of Tyana? Then you may remember it is said of him that he healed the sick, raised the dead, knew all things save the caresses of women, and spoke every language including that of colours. Well, the occultist told me that Jesus was a rabbi who surrendered his entity to the Christ, and afterward reappeared here as Apollonius. He said, too, that he was not crucified. Crucifixion, you know, is merely the symbol of initiation."

"And whom did he say was the Christ?"

"An envoy from a higher sphere."

Leilah inclined her head. "Yes, and there have, I believe, been others. From zeniths or from nadirs unknown to us, from planes, let us say, where all beatitudes are as usual as all shames are common here, spirits commissioned to regenerate the hearts of man pass into the slums of space. Confident, with a crown of light they come, only to return with one of thorns."

Tempest turned squarely in his chair. "That is a singularly beautiful idea!"

Again Leilah inclined her head. "It is beautiful. It is beautiful to think that earthward from some chromatic star the soul of Krishna may have sunk. But the idea is not mine. I found it in the *Vidyâ*."

This last statement was lost. Mme. de Fresnoy was insisting on Tempest's attention. Meanwhile a cygnet, its plumage replaced, a pond lily in its ochre beak, had been presented, carved and served. A salad, known as Half-Mourning, a composition of artichoke hearts and Piedmontese truffles, had departed with it. Now sweets had come, pastry light as a caress, volatile as an essence, that pastry of which the art is known only to the Oriental and the occasional cordon bleu.

Devoutly, with an air of invoking the Prophet, the Turk was absorbing it.

The young Baronne de Fresnoy, abandoning Tempest, looked at him. With a wicked glitter in her big blue eyes she called:

"Musty! Are you thinking of me?"

The pasha was framing a reply, a reply perhaps rather bald, when Camille de Joyeuse also addressed him. Presently she stood up. The others imitated her. The gayeties of the table were abandoned for the brilliance of the salons beyond.

Tempest, who had accompanied Leilah Barouffska said, as she seated herself:

"Are you to remain in Paris?"

Before answering, she looked up at him, for he was standing. "Who can tell what one will do? But I fancy so. We have taken a house in the rue de la Pompe."

"In the rue de la Pompe!" Tempest exclaimed. "That is where I live." He smiled. The fact that they were neighbours seemed to constitute a bond. "Whereabouts in the rue de la Pompe?"

"Next to the church."

"Do you find it convenient?"

A servant announced:

"Monsieur and madame Spencer-Poole!"

"You mean," Leilah replied, "am I a Catholic? No, I am an Episcopalian. But my views, I fear, are not orthodox. I have got so far that I believe fully in the *Vidyâ*."

She had cited the book at the dinner table but, at the time, distracted by Marie de Fresnoy, Tempest had not heard; now he exclaimed at it.

"The *Vidyâ*! Of all things! Why not the Upanishads?"

A servant announced:

"Madame la marquise de Charleroi!"

Leilah made a little gesture. "The Upanishads, too. I have great faith in them also. Their conceptions seem to me the most perfect that the human mind has evolved, that is, if it were a human mind that evolved them."

A servant announced:

"Madame la princesse Orlonna!"

"What particularly impressed you in them?" Tempest asked.

"The demonstration that life is a laboratory in which the strength of the soul is tried."

"And in the *Vidyâ*?"

"The fact that selfishness is the root of evil. That impressed me very much, primarily I suppose because it is true, but chiefly I think because I had not realized it before."

Tempest nodded. Never had he heard a mondaine cite the Upanishads. In no drawing room had he ever heard the *Vidyâ* mentioned. In his life he had not dreamed of having a digest of each produced in an atmosphere dripping with frivolities. As he nodded he reconsidered this woman. From the first he had realized that she differed from the ordinary society type. Now he saw that she belonged to a superior world.

"Do you not admire them, too?" Leilah, who had also been considering him, inquired.

Tempest adjusted his monocle. "You see, you know, the Self, the All-Self, the One, the oneness of self with everything, the oneness of all things with One, these minor motifs of theirs I may admire but I do not grasp. On the contrary, there is a certain voluminous complexity about them that makes me gasp. None the less they advance certain ideas which, while curious to the few and to the many absurd, are yet so mathematically evident; the fact for instance – "

A servant announced:

"His Highness monseigneur le prince Paul de Montebianco!"

"Monsieur Harris!"

The salons were becoming filled. The floor was swept by trains brief but brilliant. There was a multiplication of black coats, a renewed animation, a mounting murmur in which occasionally the name of a new arrival was lost.

The servant announced:

"Monsieur le vicomte and madame la vicomtesse de Helley-Quetgen!"

"Madame la princesse Zubaroff!"

"Monsieur d'Arcy!"

"Monsieur le comte Barouffski!"

The last of these, a large man, very fair, with grey-green eyes, had a studied manner which, however, his voice relieved. As he advanced and addressed Mme. de Joyeuse, it sounded supple and silken, as indeed most Slav voices do.

Already groups had formed. The corner in which Tempest stood before Leilah developed another. The Spencer-Pooles approached. With them was d'Arcy, a young man abominably good looking, famous for the prodigious variety of his affairs.

Tempest who had continued talking, who had even been expounding and who now felt that he had been holding forth, moved on. He wanted to smoke and being an habitué of the household, he knew where the smoking room was.

There, before an open fire, his hands behind his back, in that after-dinner attitude which some men assume, M. de Joyeuse stood. He was telling of a stag hunt that had been held at Monplaisir, his estate.

The duke was not an impressionist, his description lacked colour. But de Fresnoy, who had been present, resaw it all; the sheen of the horses, the green of the whippers-in, the pink coats of the sportsmen, the blue dolmans of the officers that had ridden over from a garrison near by, the verdure of the forest's edge, the view, the scramble, the run, the quarry, the hallali of the huntsman,

the leaping hounds, the fastidious ceremonial of the death and the sky of pale silk which draped with faint gold the magnificent brutality of the scene.

“It was just my luck to have missed it,” Silverstairs threw in.

De Joyeuse turned to him. “We count on you next autumn. And on you also, mon vieux,” he added to Tempest who had approached.

Tempest nodded. He was lighting a cigar. The operation concluded, he drew a chair beside Silverstairs. “Now, tell me all about Madame B.”

Silverstairs eyed him quizzingly. “She interests you?”

“Enormously.”

“Then look out for Barouffski whom she interests still more.”

Tempest shrugged his shoulders. “Was it her interest in Number One or Number One’s interest in her that declined?”

“You mean Verplank?”

“I suppose I do. Anyway I mean her first husband. Why were they divorced?”

“Why? But my dear Tempest, divorce in the States is what racing is with us, a national amusement. Everybody takes a hand in it.”

“The right or the left?”

“Both I fancy. Though in the case of Madame B. I have an idea that the right turned out to be wrong.”

Tempest flicked the ashes from his cigar. “I may compliment you, Silverstairs. You have a manner of expressing yourself which is highly cryptic. But now, to an every day sort of chap like myself, would you mind being less abstruse?”

“I should feel sordid if I refused. Verplank is a very good sort, whereas this Barouffski is a rotter.”

Tempest bowed. “Thank you for descending to my level. The long and short of it is that she has made a mess of it. Well, most people do. I don’t wonder now that over the soup she talked about fate.”

“Oh, as for that, after certain experiences of my own, with which, pray do not be alarmed, I have no intention of boring you, I have stopped wondering at anything at all.”

“Silverstairs, in ceasing to be cryptic, do not become Spartan. My cousin told me that Joyeuse hunted with this, with What’s-his-name, with – er – ”

“With Verplank?”

“Yes, that he had hunted with him in the States. And that reminds me. What have you decided about that horse?”

Silverstairs pulled at his straw-coloured moustache. “I’ll let you know to-morrow. When are you to be at home?”

“Any time after two.”

Silverstairs nodded. “Very good, I will drop in on you.”

From beyond, blue and vibrant, came the upper notes of a violin. In the now crowded salons a Roumanian, the rage of the season, a youth, very pale, with melancholy eyes, flowing hair and the waist of a girl, was executing a fantasy of his own.

De Joyeuse flicked a speck from his sleeve, threw back his noble and empty head, gave a circular look of inquiry, a little gesture of invitation, and accompanied by his friends, sauntered to the rooms without.

There, Barouffski after saluting Mme. de Joyeuse had engaged her briefly in talk. But her attention had been attracted rather than claimed by the Montebiancan prince, a young man extremely gentlemanly and equally modest who, with that diffidence which royals and poets share, stood bashfully at her side.

Barouffski, bowing again, passed on. During his short and entirely fragmentary conversation with Mme. de Joyeuse, his eyes had rummaged the room.

Leilah, meanwhile, rising from the sofa where she had been seated, moved with the inflammatory d'Arcy into the salon beyond.

Barouffski would have followed. But the young Baronne de Fresnoy addressed him. Perversely, with sudden glimpses of little teeth and an expression of glee in her piquant face, she asked:

“Was it you who performed that high act of gallantry at Longchamps to-day?”

“Was it I who did what?” Barouffski surprisedly exclaimed.

“What was it?” asked Aurelia, who with Buttercups in tow, had approached.

But Mme. de Fresnoy waved at her. “Go away my dear, it is not for an ingénue.”

“Ah then, but you see,” Aurelia indolently interjected, “I am tired of being an ingénue. An ingénue is supposed to be in a state of constant surprise and that is so exhausting.”

None the less, with Buttercups still in tow she betook herself to a corner where she was promptly joined by Farnese.

Then at once to Barouffski, to Mustim Pasha, to the Helley-Quetgens, to others that stood about, the young baroness related a morsel of gossip, the report of which had been brought her but a moment before, a story that had one of the reigning demireps for heroine and for hero a man unidentified by the baronne's informant, the tale of an assault committed before all Paris, before all Paris that is, that happened to be at the races that day; an extravaganza in which the heroine, erupting suddenly on the pelouse before the Grand Stand, had, with her parasol, struck the hero over the head and had been about to strike him again, when he, pinioning her arms with his own, had to the applause of everybody, prevented the second assault by kissing her through her veil; after which releasing the lady, he had raised his hat and strolled away.

“Was it you, Barouffski?” Mme. de Fresnoy, the narrative at an end, inquired. “Was it?”

“I? Nonsense! Why should you ask?”

“It would be just like you, you know. Besides, I hear that the man was tall and good-looking.”

“You are exceedingly complimentary. But the world is peopled with tall, good-looking men.”

“*Pas tant que ça,*” laughed the baroness. “Well, if it was not you, perhaps it was that man who is just coming in.”

Involuntarily Barouffski turned, while a footman bawled:

“Monsieur Verplank!”

III

It was in circumstances which, if not dramatic, were, at least, uncommon, that Leilah Verplank met Barouffski.

At Los Angeles, after her flight from Coronado, she caught an express that would have taken her East. Even so, it could not take her from herself, it could not distance memory, it could not annihilate the past. The consciousness of that obsessed her. Each of her thoughts became a separate throb. About her head formed an iron band. Her body ached. She felt hot and ill. She had a sense of thirst, a sense, too, of fear.

In the compartment where she sat, a stranger came. She hid her face, covering it with her hands. The stranger sidled in between them, looked her in the eyes, penetrated them, permeated her, shook long shudders through her, shrieked at her: "I am Fright!"

She cried aloud. No one heard. She got to the door.

In the section immediately adjoining were her women. Perplexed at the start by her unaccountable flight and, since then, alarmed by the abnormal excitability which she had displayed, both, at the sight of her then, rushed to her.

Salt Lake was the first possible asylum. There, weeks later, Leilah arose from one of those attacks, which, for lack of a better term, has been called brain fever.

Like fire, fever may consume, it does not necessarily obliterate. The past remained. But in that lassitude which fever leaves, Leilah was able to consider it with a wearied certainty that no immediate effort could be required of her then.

"Forget," some considerate and subliminal self admonished. "Forget."

Even in sleep she could not always do that. But though she could not forget the past, she could, she believed, barricade herself against it. The idea was suggested by the local sheet in which she found an item about neighbourly Nevada. The item hung a hammock for her thoughts, rested her mentally, unrolled a carpet for the returning steps of health.

Verplank, meanwhile, misdirected at Los Angeles, reached San Francisco. Learning there that a party of three women had, that morning, at the last moment, embarked on the Samoa packet; learning also that of these women the central figure projected, or seemed to project, Leilah's silhouette, he wired for his yacht and sailed away in pursuit. But an accident supervening, the packet reached Samoa before him. When Verplank got there the boat was gone. Still in pursuit he started for the austral seas. There, the mistake discovered, hope for the time abandoned him and he landed in Melbourne, ignorant that the supremely surgical court of Nevada was amputating him from his wife.

In matters of this solemnity, the Nevada statutes require that one of the parties to the operation shall have resided for six months within the state. But at Carson, the capital, a town that has contrived to superpose the Puritan aspect of a New England village on the vices of a Malay port, in this city Leilah learned that statutes so severe were not enacted for such as she.

The information, tolerably consoling, was placed before her by a young Jew who, as she alighted from the train, divined her errand, addressed her with easy Western informality, put a card in her hand, offered his services, telling her as he did so that if she retained him he would have her free in no time, in three months, in less. It was a mere matter of money, he explained, and, what he did not explain, a mere matter of perjury as well, the perjury of local oafs ready to swear to whatever they were paid for, ready to testify for instance that they had known anybody for any required length of time. But the Jew in divining Leilah's errand divined too her loyalty. In speaking of fees, he kept manœuvres and methods to himself.

Leilah, repelled yet beguiled, succumbed. The Jew was retained and in a wretched inn her things were unpacked. At once a rain of days began, long, loveless days in which she tried to starve her thoughts into submission and bear the cross that had been brought.

The effort was not very satisfactory. The reason why she should have a cross and why it should be borne had never even to her devout mind been adequately explained. Hitherto she had not required any explanation and not unnaturally perhaps since she had had no cross to bear. The dogma that she in common with the rest of humanity must suffer because of the natural propensities of beings that never were, she had accepted as only such dogmas can be accepted, on faith. But in the dismal solitudes of Carson, faith faded, the dogma seemed absurd.

Then suddenly that which in her ignorance she took to be chance, supplied a superior view. While waiting in a shop for a slovenly clerk to do up a package, she looked at a shelf on which were some books – frayed, bedrabbled, second hand. Among them was a treatise on metallurgy, another on horse-breeding, a string of paper covered novels and the *Vidyâ*.

The title, which conveyed nothing, for that reason attracted. At random she opened the book. A paragraph sprang at her:

“From debility to strength, from strength to power, from power to glory, from glory to perfection, from plane to plane, in an evolution proceeding from the outward to the inward, from the material to the spiritual, from the spiritual to the divine, such is the destiny of the soul.”

Leilah turned a page. Another paragraph leaped out.

“There is not an accident in our lives, not a sorrow, a misfortune, a catastrophe, a happiness that is not due to our own conduct in this existence or in a previous one. In accordance with the nature of our deeds there are thrown about us the tentacles of pain or the arms of joy.”

But the slovenly clerk was approaching. Leilah closed the book, asked the price, paid for it, paid for the other purchase and went back to the inn where during the rest of the day she read the drama of the soul, the story of its emanation from the ineffable, of its surrender to desire, of its fall into matter, of its birth and rebirth in the mansions of life which are death, of the persistence there of its illusory joys, of the recurrences of its unenlightening trials, until, at last, some memory returning of what it had been when it was other than what it had become, it learns at last to conquer desire and accomplish its own release.

The drama, however old, was new to Leilah, and at first not very clear. But beneath it was a chain of causality, the demonstration that this life is the sum of many others, the harvest after the sowing, and, joined to the demonstration were corollaries and deductions which showed that sorrow, when rightly viewed, is not a cross but a gift, a boon granted to the privileged.

It was a little before she mastered the idea. When she had, the novelty of it impressed. At the back of the *Vidyâ* was a list of cognate works. She wired to San Francisco for them. Shortly they came, and in their companionship the rain of long, loveless days fell by.

Ultimately she sat on a high chair. An oaf asked her questions. Others testified. On the morrow a paper was brought her. It had on it a large seal, the picture of a big building, words that were engrossed, others in script.

She was free.

The knowledge brought no exultation. It was a hostage to joy, one of the many that she was to give.

Meanwhile she had written to Violet Silverstairs telling her that she had separated from Verplank, and asking might she join her. The answer, which was cabled, told her to come. That day she started.

The town house of the Earls of Silverstairs is in Belgrave Square. There are worse places. But to the American countess the discomforts of the residence were not to be endured. After one season she declined to put up with them. Pending an entire modernisation of the house, she and

Silverstairs migrated to Paris, where they took an apartment, and a very charming one, in the rue François Premier.

In this apartment Leilah was made to feel that she was with friends, one of whom, however, could not get over the fact that she could not get at the facts in the matter.

“See here, Leilah,” Violet Silverstairs said aggrievedly, not once, but fifty times, “it is downright mean of you to keep me in the dark. What was it that he did? Tell me.”

The lady had known Verplank, as she had known Leilah, ever since she had known anybody. They had grown up together. Though not related by blood, they were by choice, which is sometimes thicker. In the circumstances it was perhaps but natural that she should call it mean, perhaps but human that she should be aggrieved.

The puzzle of the situation she put before her husband.

“What do you suppose it can be?” she asked.

But Silverstairs had no surmises to hazard.

“It must be something quite too dreadful,” Violet continued. “One of those things, don’t you know, that are said to change your whole life. She just sits about and reads queer books.”

“Queer books!” Silverstairs surprisedly repeated.

“Yes, books that tell of planes and rounds and cycles and chains of lives and rebirths and redeaths. She believes in them, too. She told me so.”

Silverstairs tugged at his moustache. “She might as well believe in the music of the spheres.”

Violet looked at her lord. She loved him as certain delicately organized women do love men who are merely robust. But her affection did not warp her judgment. She knew that within his splendid physique was a spirit, valiant perhaps, but obtuse.

“Well, why not?” she retorted. “Let a microphone receive from a steel plate the reflection of a star, and sounds are emitted, tones peculiar to the star itself. Those of the sun are blatant. Those of Arcturus are like little bells. Those of Sirius are as sobs from a zither. Everybody knows that. Why shouldn’t she believe in the music of the spheres?”

“Gammon!” cried this man who at Eton and Christ Church had abundantly acquired everything which is most useless. “I never heard such rot.”

“I daresay, but that is not the point. The point is that it is no joke to her.”

Nor was it. Leilah at first refused to go anywhere, to see any one, to be present when there were guests. But Violet, declaring that she would have no moping in her diggings, forced her. It was very reluctantly that Leilah acceded. After a while she did so as a matter of course. Finally, as was inevitable, she accepted invitations elsewhere.

It was what Violet had aimed at, though not at all at the result. Yet that, Leilah, who had come to believe in karma, afterward regarded as fate.

Presently, it so fell about that at one dinner she had at her left a man whom she did not know, whose name she had not caught and with whom, during the preliminary courses, she had not exchanged a word. As the dinner progressed, cigarettes were served. Twice she refused them. The second time, as she turned again to the man at her right, she heard a cry, across the table she saw a face, the eyes staring, the features elongated. At once there was an uproar, behind her there was a crash, she was torn bodily from her chair, a piece of tapestry had been thrown about her and in it she was rolled on the floor by the man whom she did not know.

Probably, at no dinner, anywhere, had a woman suffered such indignities. She was so telling herself when she realised, as she immediately did realise, that the man and others who had joined him, were but occupied in saving her life. Her dress had caught fire and it was in this flaming fashion, hurled on the floor by a stranger and there brutalised by him, that she made the acquaintance of Count Kasimiérz Barouffski.

The sack of her costume forced her to return to the rue François Premier, where at five o’clock the next day, Barouffski appeared. He appeared the day following, the day after, the day after that.

These attentions Violet Silverstairs viewed with suspicion.

“I verily believe,” she said to Leilah, “that it was that polecat who set you on fire, and if he did no one can convince me that he did not do it on purpose.”

“Violet!”

“That’s right, fly at me. I thought you would. Are you going to take him?”

In an elaborate drawing room in the rue François Premier the two women were having tea. Leilah, without replying, raised her cup.

Violet cocked an eye at her. “One would have thought that you had had enough of matrimony. But perhaps your intentions are not honourable.”

Leilah reddened. “Violet!” she again exclaimed.

“My dear,” Lady Silverstairs resumed, “remember that you are no longer in the States. England is the most hypocritical country in Europe. America is the most hypocritical country in the world. That is what we call progress. But France being old-fashioned and behind the times is not censorious. I admit, I used to be. But I am not censorious any longer. I am not because any such *état d’âme* while advanced is not becoming.

“I am an old married woman,” added the lady who was not twenty-two. “But if I were not, if for instance I were like you, free, independent and not a fright, and I had to choose between love and matrimony, it would not take me a moment to decide. Not one.”

Leilah put down her cup. “Of course it would not. If you had it to do again you would marry Silverstairs and you would marry for love. That is over for me, over forever.”

Narrowly, out of a corner of an eye, Violet considered her. “He was such a brute, was he?”

“Who? Gulian, do you mean?”

“I suppose so. There has been no other, has there?”

“Violet!”

It was at this juncture, for the fiftieth time, that Lady Silverstairs exclaimed:

“It is downright mean of you to keep me in the dark. What was it that happened? Make a soiled breast of it. Do!”

For the fiftieth time Leilah protested:

“Don’t ask me. Don’t. He knows and that is enough. As for me I am trying to forget.”

“And you think Barouffski will help you. But has it ever occurred to you that if you were not very rich he might lack the incentive?”

To this Leilah assented. “He said he is poor.”

“At least he does not exaggerate. I told Silverstairs that he was after you for your money and he said that was what he married me for. So he did and I married him for his title. It was a fair bargain. Now if we had it to do over I would say – I would say – well, I would say that it is better to have loved your husband than never to have loved at all. But six months hence, if you had it to do over, do you think you could say as much – or as little?”

“At least I could say that I did not marry for a title.”

“Well, hardly, particularly a Polish one, though I daresay even that might be useful in the servants’ hall. But what could you say you married for? It isn’t love?”

“No.”

“Nor position?”

“No.”

“Then what on earth – ”

“Violet, how hard you make it for me. Can’t you see that if I do, it will be for protection?”

“For protection! Merciful fathers! You talk like a chorus girl! Protection against what? Against whom? Verplank?”

“No.” Leilah choking down something in her throat, replied: “Against myself.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Violet slowly. But she did or thought she did, and that night told Silverstairs that Leilah was still in love with her ex.

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