The Secret of Emu Plain, and The Face of the Abbot

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The Secret of Emu Plain

Four Short Stories

L. T. Meade

IT so happened that business called me to Queensland in the late October of 1894, and hearing that my old friend, Rosamund Dale, was about to be married, I determined to present myself at Jim Macdonald's station on the Barcoo District in December, in order to be present at the ceremony. I had seen a good deal of Rosamund when she was a child, and it was an old promise of mine that, if possible, I was to be one of the guests at her wedding.

I arrived at Macdonald's a week before Christmas, and when a hot wind, or sirocco, was blowing in from the west. I little thought, as I did so, that the strangest, and most terrible adventure of my life was about to take place in the Queensland bush. But so it was, and this is the story just as it happened.

I had been delayed on my journey, and on the evening of my arrival the wedding was to take place. Macdonald's property was about seven hundred and fifty square miles in extent, and was in the heart of the hills, which are the fountain-head of the countless creeks that run south, and join to form the Warrego, and eventually the Great Darling River, some four hundred miles away. It was good grazing country on the whole, but contained one enormous tract of arid sand, some forty square miles in extent, which went by the name of Emu Plain. Skirting one corner of this plain ran the coach road from Blackall to Charleville, along which ran Cobb & Co.'s coach once a fortnight. Almost in the middle of the plain stood in solitary grandeur the great Emu Rock, a grotesque, bare, perpendicular crag of limestone, rising a sheer three hundred feet from the ground.

Leaving my heavy luggage at Blackall, I had come with a valise by Cobb & Co.'s coach to the cross roads, and had then ridden over to

Macdonald's house, a low wooden homestead of one storey, with a verandah running all round it. The sitting-rooms opened into the verandah. There was a garden at the back, enclosed by a fence. Macdonald met me with words of hearty welcome.

"But you are late, Bell," he exclaimed, "Rosamund has been waiting impatiently for your arrival all day. She never forgets how good you were to her when she was a child, and all alone in the old country. But let me take you to your room for a tub and brush up, for she would like to see you for a moment or two before the wedding."

Jim took me to my apartment in the left wing of the house, and half an hour later I joined Rosamund Dale on the balcony. She was a handsome dark-eyed girl, with a bright vivacious face and sparkling eyes. She had changed much in appearance since I had last seen her, as a small and somewhat awkward schoolgirl, but her affectionate heart and frank manners were still abundantly manifest. She made me seat myself in a deck chair, and began at once to talk about her bridegroom. Goodwin was the best man in the world, she loved him with all her heart and soul; she liked the life in the bush, too. Notwithstanding its loneliness there was an element of excitement about it which quite suited her nature.

As she spoke to me I noticed that she looked anxiously out, and shading her eyes with her hand I saw them travel across the paddock, and up the road.

"What is the matter, Rosamund," I said at last; "and, by the way," I added, "won't you introduce me to Mr. Goodwin?"

"He has not come yet, and I cannot understand it," replied the girl; "he ought to have been here an hour ago. His station is about thirty miles from here, just across Emu Plain."

"What a hideous piece of desolation that Emu Plain is," I answered. "I skirted it on the coach, and never saw anything so repulsive in my life."

I noticed that Rosamund shuddered, and her face turned pale.

"It is an ugly place," she said at last, "and bears a bad name."

"What do you mean by that?" I interrupted.

"You will laugh at me, Mr. Bell," was her reply, "but people say the plain is haunted. Some most extraordinary disappearances have taken place there from time to time. If Frank came across the plain there is no saying, but"--she looked me full in the face.

"I am surely frightening myself about nothing," she said. "Will you excuse me a moment? I must just go into the drawing-room and ask if there is any news of Frank."

She rose, and I followed her into the room behind the verandah. I there, for the first time, made Mrs. Macdonald's acquaintance. She was a hearty, good-natured looking woman, with eyes like Rosamund's. She seemed devotedly attached to her niece, and now went up to the girl, and kissed her affectionately.

"Your uncle has just gone off to meet Frank," she said; "they are sure to be here in a few moments."

She spoke cheerfully, but I felt certain that I noticed a veiled anxiety in her eyes.

At that moment a man crossed the room, came up to Rosamund, and held out his hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Corry?" said the girl gravely. She had beautiful

dark eyes, with magnificent lashes, and I observed, as Corry spoke to her, that she lowered them, and avoided looking at him. He was a thin, tall man, with red hair, and a slight cast in one eye. His lips were thin, the thinnest I had ever seen, and their expression, joined to the cast in the eye, gave him a sinister look. He was on good terms, however, with all the guests, and had the manners of a gentleman. Rosamund returned to the verandah, and I followed her.

"Are you really nervous about anything?" I said. "Is it possible that you apprehend that an accident has happened to Goodwin?"

"How can I tell?" she answered, and now a look of agony crossed her strong face. "He ought to be here before now; he has never failed before, and on his wedding evening, too! The Plain is haunted, you know, Mr. Bell. Don't laugh at me when I say that I--I believe in the ghost of Emu Plain."

"You must tell me more," I answered. "You know," I continued with a smile, "that I am interested in ghosts."

She could not return my smile; her face grew whiter and whiter.

"Who is that man Corry?" I said, after a pause.

"Oh, never mind about him," she answered impatiently. "He has a selection about twenty miles from here, and is, I believe, an Englishman. I cannot think what is keeping Frank," she added. "Ah! thank God! I hear horses' hoofs at last."

She ran to the farther end of the verandah, and stood there, gazing up the road with the most longing, perplexed expression I had ever seen on human face. Alas! only one rider was returning, and that was Macdonald himself. He came in cheerfully, said that Frank might appear at any moment, and suggested we should all go to supper.

At that meal I noticed that Rosamund only played with her food. She was seated near Mr. Lee, the clergyman from the nearest township, who had come over to marry her. He talked to her in low tones, and she replied listlessly. It was evident that her thoughts were with her absent lover, and that she could think of nothing else. At last the miserable meal had dragged to an end, the evening passed away somehow, and the different guests retired to their rooms. By--and--by Macdonald and I found ourselves alone.

"Now, what is up?" I said, going up to him at once; "Jim, what is the meaning of this?"

"God only knows," was his reply; "I don't like it, Bell, and that's a fact. You noticed that big plain as you came along by the coach?"

"Emu Plain?" I replied.

Jim nodded.

"It bears an ugly reputation," he said. "There have been the most extraordinary disappearances there from time to time. The blacks say that the place is haunted by a ghost, which they call the Bunyip. Of course, I don't believe in anything of that sort; but it is a fact that you will scarcely get a black man to cross the plain after dark, and two or three of our settlers have entered that plain alone and never been heard of since. Whether the agency which causes them to disappear is ghostly or otherwise it is impossible for me to say."

"You surely do not believe in the Bunyip?" I said, with a slight laugh.

"Hush!" he answered. "The fact is this, Bell; old man; I cannot laugh over the matter. If anything has happened to Goodwin I believe he--hollo! who can this be? Lie down, boy," added Jim to Help, his big

collie.

We went out into the paddock. As we did so a man rode quickly up, whom Jim recognised at once as one of the mounted police.

"What's up, Jack?" said Jim.

"A traveller riding alone from Blackall has got bushed on the ranges," was the man's reply. "I heard that Frank Goodwill had not turned up here, and it occurred to me that you ought to know at once. The man's horse, with an empty saddle, was found on your boundary fence. It is possible that he had an accident. Could you let me have Billy, your black tracker? The poor chap may be lying crippled and cannot move on some of the ranges. There is not a moment to lose."

"Good God! Then it must be Goodwin," exclaimed Jim. "We won't tell Rosamund yet. We will bring Billy and go with you at once, Jack," he continued. "You will come along, too, won't you, Bell?" he added briskly. "Anything is better than suspense. I'll get the horses up and we'll start in a moment, though we won't be able to do much before daylight."

In less than a quarter of an hour we set out. Billy, the black tracker, looked sulky, and also considerably alarmed, and Jim whispered to me that he had great difficulty in making him come at all.

"He believes in that Bunyip," he added, dropping his voice to a hoarse whisper.

Billy himself was an ill-favoured looking creature, but as a tracker he was possessed of almost superhuman powers, and was noted in all the district as one who could follow tracks of almost any kind. He had only one eye, the other having been knocked out in a scrimmage, but with that eye he could read the ground as a civilised man reads a

book.

We started off slowly. Billy was presently induced to ride ahead. He sucked his pipe as if he took no interest in the affair.

"Goodwin must be somewhere on the ranges," said Macdonald emphatically. "But how he got off the track beats me, as he knows every yard of the place. There is foul play somewhere."

Just as he said the last words Billy turned in his saddle, and cocking his one eye round, said slowly:

"Baal boodgeree Emu Plain night time. Bunyip there."

"Nonsense, Billy," replied Macdonald almost angrily. "There is no such thing as the Bunyip, and you know that as well as I do."

"I see Bunyip once in Emu Plain, along rock," the black went on. "I make tracks, my word!"

Just as the day broke our way led us out of the scrub, and the trees began to get more sparsely scattered, till we suddenly burst upon the borders of the great plain itself. A few moments afterwards Billy uttered a cry and picked up the tracks. With his one eye fixed on the ground he dismounted, and began to examine some bent grass and disturbed stones. To my unaccustomed vision the signs that guided him were absolutely invisible. It was an exhibition of instinct that no one would believe without seeing it.

On and on we went through the heat, silent and expectant; now up, now down, over ridge and gully. Suddenly Billy uttered a sharp cry, and leaping from his horse gave me the reins, and walked round and round, peering about and grunting to himself. At last, looking up, he exclaimed "Man meet someone here."

"Meet someone," cried Macdonald. "Are you sure, Billy?"

"Quite sure," was the answer. He took his tomahawk and cut a notch in one of the trees in order to mark the spot. We then remounted and rode on. In a moment Billy spoke again. "More horses! my word!" he said. "Look! "

The marks were clear enough now, even to us. In a piece of soft ground were the hoof-marks of three horses. Billy said no more, but put his horse in a canter. We followed him. About a mile farther we pulled up at the edge of the scrub. We were now close to the great Emu Rock. I noticed at once that a number of crows were wheeling round its summit.

"It is strange," said Jim, speaking in a hoarse voice, "but I never come near this great rock that I don't see the crows whirling round the top. Ay, there they go, as usual," he added, clutching my arm. "My God! whenever a man disappears there are marks of a struggle at the foot of the rock. Watch Billy now, he will know in a moment. Oh! merciful heaven! it is true then, and something has happened to Goodwin. Poor Rosamund; this will break her heart. Yes, there are the marks, Billy notices them. Now, Bell, you never had a greater mystery than this to solve. Marks at the foot of the rock, a man disappears, never found again. What does it mean, Bell? Where does he go? There must be devilry in the matter."

Billy had dismounted and was bending over the ground. Suddenly he uttered a sharp shrill cry.

"The marks! the marks!" he gasped. "Bunyip here, man here. Debil, debil take him. See! see! see!"

His intense excitement communicated itself to us. He began to run about, peering down low over the ground.

"See! see!" he repeated. "They get off here. Go this way, that way. Ah! a spur come off." His quick eye had caught the glitter. He picked up a long spur. "Yes, yes; it is as it always is: three men fight, two men go away; one man--where he go? Debil take him." He pointed to the sky, gazing up and showing his white teeth in horror.

"Nonsense, Billy!" said Macdonald, in a voice which he tried to render commonplace and assured.

I looked at him and saw that he was shaking from head to foot.

"Come away," he said to me. "Poor girl, poor Rosamund. Billy," he added abruptly, turning to the tracker, "we must pick up the tracks of these horses."

We mounted and followed the horse tracks again. We ran the tracks back to the coach road, and then lost them in the confusion of a mob of cattle that had passed during the morning.

"Well, this is a bad business," said Macdonald. "Goodwin is missing, and what took place on the plain by the rock, and how he has disappeared from the face of the earth, and who are the men who had a hand in it, are insoluble problems. It is not the first time, Bell, and that's the horror of the thing. I tell you, I don't like the business at all. It looks uncommonly like another of those queer disappearances."

"Tell me about them," I said suddenly.

He began to talk, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"A year ago a man was lost on Emu Plain; he was a young fellow, an Englishman, and the heir to a big property. He was seen to cross the plain on horseback one afternoon, and was never heard of or seen

again, and there were the marks of a struggle by the great rock, just as we saw them to-day, Bell. His people have spent thousands trying to discover the mystery, but all in vain. Since then the neighbourhood of the rock has been avoided, and the horror of the plain has grown in the minds of everybody. For this disappearance was not the first, others had preceded it. From time to time, at longer or shorter intervals, a man entered that desolate plain, and never, as far as human being could tell, left it again. What does the thing portend?"

Billy kept on croaking "Bunyip! Bunyip!" At last Macdonald shouted to him that he would break his head if he said the word any more.

We returned to the station. Rosamund, with a face like death, came out to meet us.

"You must bear up, my dear," said her uncle.

"Any news?" she asked.

"Well, there are tracks of a struggle on the plain," he said, with evident reluctance, "but we cannot follow them. A mob of cattle passed up the road this morning and have confused the tracks."

"Where was the struggle?" she said in a low voice.

Macdonald avoided her eyes. She gave him a direct and piercing glance.

"Come on to the verandah, Uncle Jim, and you too, Mr. Bell, and tell me everything," said the girl. Her voice was quiet and had a strange stillness about it. We followed her without a word. She drew deck chairs forward as we entered the cool verandah, and then kneeling by my side, laid her hand on my shoulder.

"Now," she said, facing Macdonald, "tell me all. Where was the struggle?"

"Rosamund, you must bear up; it was in the old spot, at the foot of the great rock. There, my girl," he added hastily, rising as he spoke, "I don't give up hope yet. I will send off Jack immediately, and have the affair telegraphed all round the country."

He left the verandah, walking slowly. Rosamund turned to me.

"My fears are certainties," she said; "and Frank has disappeared just as the other men have disappeared; but oh, my God," she added, rising hastily to her feet, "I will find him, I will. If he is alive I will find him, and you, Mr. Bell, must help me. You have solved mysteries before, but never so great a one as this. You will help me, will you not?"

"With all my heart, my child," I answered.

"Then there is not a moment to lose, let us go at once."

"No, no, Rosamund, that would be madness," I said. "If Goodwin is alive the police will get tidings of him, and if not--" my voice fell; Rosamund looked at me intently.

"Do you think I can rest so?" she said. "If you do not want to drive me mad, something must be done immediately."

"Then what do you propose?" I asked, looking at her.

"To go back with you to the plain, to examine those marks myself, to bring my woman's wit and intuition to bear on the matter. Where man may fail to discover any cause a woman may succeed; you know I am right."

"And I would take you with me gladly if it were possible, but it is not."

"Do you think anything that is possible for a man is impossible for a woman?" she said. "We can take some food with us, and start at once. We won't consult anyone. If we are quick, we can reach the rock an hour or two before sunset, and I know the whole of the ghastly place so well that we can return in the moonlight. Oh, don't oppose me," she added, "for if you do I will start alone. Anything is better than inaction."

I did not say a word. She gave me a quick, grateful glance, and left the verandah. Half-an-hour later she appeared in the paddock, equipped in a stout habit, and mounted on a splendid black horse; she led another by the bridle for me. We started off at once, and reached the great rock by daylight. The sweltering sun beat down upon our heads, and the arid sand rose in clouds around us, but Rosamund neither faltered nor complained--a spirit burned within her which no obstacle could daunt. There were the marks of the struggle plainly visible. Rosamund knelt on the ground and examined them with as close and keen an eye as even Billy the black tracker himself. We walked round and round the rock, the crows whirled in circles over our heads, making hideous noises as they did so. But, search as we would, we could find no clue beyond the very manifest one, that where three had fought and struggled only two had gone away. What--what in the name of heaven had become of the third?

Before sunset Rosamund put her hand in mine. "Take me home," she said faintly. I did so. We neither of us spoke on that desolate return journey.

Again the next day we visited the rock, and made a careful search, and the next day and the next, and meanwhile the country rang with the disappearance of Frank Goodwin, and with news of Rosamund's

grief. But no clue could we obtain anywhere. We could not get the faintest tidings of the missing man. That it was Goodwin's horse which was found by the boundary fence was beyond doubt. He had started from his station in good time on that fatal morning, and in the best of health and spirits, but from that moment he had never been seen.

I stayed with the Macdonalds for over a fortnight, and then, loth as I was to leave Rosamund in her trouble, I had to take my departure, owing to some pressing business in Brisbane, but I promised to return again as soon as I could. My plan was to ride for my first stage to Corry's selection. Billy would come with me, and bring back the horse I was riding. I would then wait for the coach to pick me up.

I arrived at Corry's in good time, sent Billy back with my horse, and as there were still some hours before Cobb's coach would pass it suddenly occurred to me that I would go once again to the Emu Rock, and exert every faculty I possessed to discover the mystery. Corry and the two friends who lived with him, Englishmen of much his own build and make, were out. I told Corry's black servant that I was going to try and bag a plain turkey, and borrowed one of his guns for the purpose.

In about half an hour I reached the rock. The sun was already dipping low over the hills. Across the summit of the rock, crows and eagle-hawks wheeled to and fro. I walked round and round it in despair. I longed to tear its ghastly secret out of the silent rock. What strange scene had it not, in all probability, recently witnessed?

By-and-by I sat down at the base of the rock, and watched the shadow creeping across the plain as the sun sank lower and lower. I was just making up my mind to return to Corry's when suddenly, within a few yards of me, I saw something drop on the sand. It made no noise, but as it fell it caught my eye. Wondering vaguely what it might

be I got up, and sauntered across to the place. I saw something on the ground, an odd- looking thing. I bent down to see what it was. As I did so my heart stood still. I was looking at a human finger. The flesh was nearly all picked from the bone. I took it in my hand and gazed at it--my pulses were throbbing, and a deadly fear seized me. Where had it come from? What did it mean? Then in an instant a wild thought struck me. I looked up. Still flying to and fro noisily were the crows and hawks. Could one of them have dropped the finger? Was the body of Frank Goodwin at the top of the Emu Rock? The idea was monstrous, and yet there was the finger, and the crows wheeling round and round above me. But how could I prove my ghastly suspicion? By no earthly means would it be possible to scale three hundred feet of perpendicular rock. If the body of poor Goodwin was there, how in the name of all that was mysterious had it been put there? One thing, at least, was certain, I must go back at once to Macdonald's station and report the horrible discovery I had made, and arrange for an investigation of the summit of the rock to take place immediately.

The sirocco was still blowing hard, and great eddies of sand were circling in the air. A sand-storm was evidently coming on, and there was nothing for me to do but to lie down and bury my face in the ground until it passed by. I did so, my pulses throbbing, the most nameless fear and depression stealing over me. The storm grew greater, it was upon me. I kept my eyes shut, and my face buried. All of a sudden, from what quarter I knew not, there came a dizzy pain; lights danced before my eyes. I seemed to sink into nothingness, my terrors were lifted from me, I was enshadowed in an impregnable darkness, and remembered no more.

When I came to myself I was lying on my back, and gazing up at the stars. Everything around me was silent as the grave, except the noise of the wind through the scrub which, curiously enough, now sounded

far below me. I was lying on hard rock, and every bone in my body ached. I managed to turn myself slowly round, and then gazed about me. Where in the name of heaven was I? I saw that I was lying in a sort of basin of rock, the edge of which was some ten feet above me, but what was this dark mass lying a little to my left? I managed to crawl towards it. Great Heavens! it was a human body. The moment I saw it memory returned. I knew what my last conscious thoughts had been. I was in the midst of a sand-storm at the foot of the great Emu Rock. Darkness, joined to heavy pain, had overtaken me. When I came to myself I was at the top of the Emu Rock, and the body beside me was, doubtless, that of Frank Goodwin. By what supernatural agency had I been transported here? For a moment my brain reeled, and I thought that I must be the victim of some hideous nightmare.

The moon was riding high in the heavens; the sand-storm had completely passed; the stars were bright. In this subdued light I could see every object around me almost as vividly as if it were day. I gazed once again at the body of the man by my side. Suddenly my heart leapt with fresh fear, and I raised myself on my elbow. I thought I saw the body stir. Could it be still alive? No. Yet, as if poised above the shoulder, something was moving--a black, smooth object, which swayed gently to and fro with a horrible and perfect regularity. The silence was suddenly broken by a long low hiss, and I now perceived that the coils of an enormous snake heaved and rolled, as the loathsome creature slowly unwound itself, and glided noiselessly up the side of the rock. Drops of sweat broke out upon my forehead, and for fully an hour I lay still, literally paralysed with fear. Then the mad courage of desperation seized me, and with a reckless disregard of danger from the reptile I sprang back to the edge of the rock; but as I did so I knew all the time that a pair of glittering eyes was fixed upon me. Never for a moment did they blink, or withdraw their gaze. Single-handed and unarmed, in a prison from which escape was

impossible, I was face to face with this deadly reptile. For all I knew there might be many others close beside me among the rocks.

The dawn began slowly to break. The light grew stronger every moment, as I crouched on one side of my prison, tense and motionless. I knew that if I stirred, the reptile would spring upon me. It was coiled up now on the rock exactly opposite the spot where the body of Frank Goodwin lay. Once I ventured to turn my eyes and look round. Three hundred feet below stretched the plain. Yes; escape was impossible. Now I had to face either a quick death from the bite of this huge brown snake, or a lingering death from thirst and starvation. Just for a moment I nearly yielded to a sudden impulse that assailed me, to take one step back over the edge of the basin and end my sufferings instantaneously. But, sick and faint as I still was, I determined to have one last fight before I destroyed myself. Cautiously, and still keeping my eyes upon the brute, I loosened a large flat stone, weighing nearly a couple of pounds; and; gently and slowly-- for all the while those eyes, which never blinked, were fixed upon me--I unfastened my leather belt and made a loop with one end through the buckle. Then slipping in the stone, I drew the strap tightly round the stone. Here was an improvised weapon, a good one if I chanced to have the first blow. Wrapping the end of the belt twice round my hand, I crept slowly forward, across the body of the dead man. As I did so, the great snake moved to and fro, and, opening its jaws, hissed at me in fury. I knew now that in a moment he would spring. I held out my hand, keeping the strap with the stone at the end well behind me, and then with all my force swung it round over my shoulder at the brute. At the same instant, with incredible swiftness, it struck out sideways at me. The huge stone met it halfway, and it fell, with its back broken, at my feet, hissing and wriggling in hideous contortions. I sprang back and, once more swinging round the stone with all my force, crushed its head against the rock. In another moment I had flung it over, and was watching its great body whirling

down through the air to the plain below.

This immediate danger passed, I now began as coolly as I could to calculate my own chances. It was impossible to say when the news of my disappearance might reach Jim Macdonald's station. Perhaps not for weeks. Meanwhile, what was to become of me? If there were no more brown snakes lurking between the crevices of the rock, I must, at best, slowly die from thirst and starvation. Surely by superhuman agency had I been transported to this giddy eminence. But escape was absolutely impossible. Poor Rosamund! I had at last succeeded in my quest, and Goodwin's mangled body lay close to me. Was I to share a similar fate?

As the hopelessness of the situation came upon me I trembled. The sun was now well up, and I knew that my sufferings from heat and thirst were all too soon to begin. I removed my shirt, and tearing it into strips fastened them together and then attached the free end to a projection of rock. I then flung the body of poor Goodwin on to the plain below. As I did so the grim idea of ending my sufferings by suicide recurred to me once more. If no help came I would, when my pains became intolerable, fling myself also from the dizzy height. I sat down on a huge stone and looked out towards the coach road. The hours dragged wearily on, but no sign of human life did I see.

The blazing sun beat mercilessly upon my head, and by midday the pangs of thirst had almost arisen to torture, and hunger also now assailed me. I was faint and giddy too, and discovered that I was suffering from a severe blow on the head. Doubtless I had received this blow at the foot of the rock; it had rendered me unconscious, and the mysterious agency which had lifted me to the height above was then brought into requisition. Were they indeed ghostly hands which had dealt me this blow? Was the Bunyip a real devil? Was Emu Plain haunted by a horror which admitted of no solution?

From time to time I shouted insanely, in order to keep off the eagle-hawks and crows which swooped down and wheeled round me. More than once I rose and peered down over the edge of my awful prison. There was not the slightest ledge or projection from the smooth sides for more than a hundred feet. Escape was out of the question.

My weakness was increasing hour by hour, and I resolved that if relief did not come before the sun set to-morrow, I would take that desperate leap and end my sufferings. I dared not sleep lest I might miss the frail chance of anyone coming, and the whole long night I paced around, shouting at intervals, though my voice came hoarse and thick from my parched lips. As morning broke once more I was utterly exhausted, and lay down, now half delirious from raging fever. My head felt as if it would burst, and the great rock seemed to reel and totter beneath me. The hours went by I know not how; time seemed nowhere; reality had merged into a ghostly phantasmagoria, hunger and thirst grew greater and greater. Insensibly, and scarcely knowing why I did it, I crept to the edge of that terrible cup in the rock. I could stand my tortures no longer. Instantaneous death should end my sufferings. I gazed round with haggard eyes for my last look at earth. Suddenly a shrill shout rent the air. I reeled back and clung to the corner of the rock for support. Once again came the noise. I heard my name, followed immediately by the report of a gun. The next instant I saw lying across the cup of rock close beside me a thin piece of cord.

"Catch it and haul in," I heard in a drawling voice as through a telephone from below.

I leapt up, hope had returned. My delirium fell from me like a mantle. For the time I was myself once more. I obeyed the words from below, and began frantically to haul in the rope. Coil after coil came up

thicker and thicker till presently I held in my hands a stout rope. I now mustered all my remaining strength and fastened the rope tightly round the neck of a piece of solid rock. After doing this I remembered nothing more.

They told me afterwards, long weeks afterwards, when my fever had left me, and weak as a child I submitted to Rosamund's ministrations--they told me then, in my room at Jim Macdonald's station, what had really occurred.

Rosamund had dreamt the strangest dream of her life. She had gone through overmastering terror; horror beyond description had visited her. She had dreamt that I was on the top of the Emu Rock, and insisted on going there, accompanied by Jim and Billy, the black tracker. At the base of this mighty rock evidence of the most terrible character met her eyes, but, brave girl that she was, she turned her attention to the rescue of the living. A cord was sent up to my dizzy eminence by means of a rocket gun, and when I had fastened the rope to the rock Billy himself had come up and brought me down.

Thus I was saved from the very jaws of death. But what the mystery was, and how Frank Goodwin's body had been hauled up to the top of the Emu Rock, and how I myself had got there, are insoluble mysteries. I have unearthed more than one ghost in my day, but the great Bunyip of Emu Plain has baffled my ingenuity. He has won in the fight, and I bow my head in silence, owning that he, in his unfathomable mystery, is stronger than I.

A MYSTERY COMPETITION

OPEN TO ALL READERS OF THE ABOVE STORY.

THIS exceedingly clever story is the sequel to the adventures of John Bell, the ghost exposer, related for us by Mrs. Meade last year, under

the title of "A MASTER OF MYSTERIES". Some of our readers will remember that Mrs. Meade spoke then of one mystery which John Bell had not been able to fathom. The above story of Emu Plain is the mystery in question. That which John Bell could not explain is, however, known to the authors of the adventure. We suggest that our readers attempt to solve the mystery themselves, and we will award Ten Prizes of One Guinea each to the ten solutions which, in Mrs. Meade's opinion, are the best sent to us. These solutions, marked "STORY PRIZE," and addressed to the Editor of CASSELL'S MAGAZINE, La Belle Sauvage, London, E.G., must reach us on or before February 15th. We shall publish Mrs. Meade's explanation of the mystery in our April Number. No person may send more than one solution of the story, and no solution must exceed 300 words in length.

The following is the authors' solution of the mystery which was left unexplained in our December number.

BEFORE leaving the old country for Australia, Corry, who was a clever mechanician, had been engaged for a long time in investigating the possible uses of kites for military operations, and had made a large number of very interesting experiments as to their lifting power. He found (and his results corresponded with those of other investigators) that in a fairly strong wind one square foot of kite surface would raise half a pound. He found, also, that to obviate the inconvenience of using a large and unwieldy kite for raising heavy weights, a series of small kites attached vertically one above the other answered the purpose equally well. And by this means he succeeded in raising weights up to 200 lb. by attaching them to the ground-rope about six feet from the lowest of the kites and employing a horse to draw the rope.

By means of a slip-rope arrangement an enormous explosive charge

could be raised and dropped over an enemy's fortification with considerable accuracy, three kites, each ten feet square, raising eleven stone.

Hereditarily tainted with criminal instincts, coupled with a fantastic imagination, the peculiar construction of the Emu Rock suggested to him that by means of kites the body of a man could be raised and deposited upon the top where it could never by any possibility be discovered. An opportunity for practically putting this diabolical scheme to the test soon occurred. So long as the sirocco was blowing, the feat was comparatively easy. The manner in which John Bell became one of his victims is already known.

AWARD OF THE PRIZES.

THE task of selecting the winners of the ten prizes, of one guinea each, offered in our December number for the best solutions of the mystery left unexplained by the authors of "The Secret of Emu Plain," has proved no light one. Of the three hundred and eighty--six competitors who essayed the solution of the problem, only four actually indicated the use of a kite, and one of these four, Mr. F. M. Holmes, being a contributor to CASSELL'S MAGAZINE, was hors concours.

Many competitors sent with their solutions letters which spoke of the interest which the unexplained problem had aroused, and attempts to solve it came from every country of Europe as well as from the Far West of the United States, the West Indies, Canada, India, and Australia. Even more diversified than the origin of the solutions was their nature. Nearly half the competitors found their way to the top of the rock by means of a fissure or tunnel in the limestone, whose existence was known only to Corry and his associates; and a very large number staked its chance of a prize on the suggestion that a whirlwind was the sole force by which the bodies were raised from

the plain to the top of the crag. Not a few hazarded the suggestion that the rocket-gun, which played so important a part in the rescue of Mr. Bell, had a counterpart which was equally active in getting him "into the hole." The united efforts of crows and eagle-hawks, the snake, balloons-both captive and free-and even indigestion on the part of Mr. Bell, were all, in turn, offered as explanations of the mystery. Though so few of the solutions were absolutely in accord with that deposited by the authors, under seal, before a single competitor had entered the lists, and only opened after the most laggard of our competitors had shot his bolt, the ingenuity with which so many competitors defended most plausible keys to the mystery added to the difficulty of making an award. The names of the ten prize- winners are given in alphabetical order in the following list:--

AGNES CLANCHY, Sunville, Cork.
Miss CROSLAND, c/o Messrs. Homberger and Co., Stoney Street, Nottingham.
W. R. FOSTER, 73, Port Street, Bengeworth, Evesham.
SAM. H. GOOD, Advertiser Offices, Adelaide, S.A. E.
T. JONES, Potomas, Salto, Uruguay.
The Rev.J. MIREHOUSE, Colsterworth, Grantham.
MINNIE ROBERTSON, 11, Salisbury Square, Fleet Street, E.C.
THOS. V. STATON, Duddo, Norham--on--Tweed.
W. H. TWAMLEY Trinolin Glebe, Ballyboro, co. Kildare, Ireland.
DORA M. WATTS, Carrhoime, Stackhouse, Settle.

THE END

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Author: L.T. Meade and Robert Eustace
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The Face of the Abbot

L.T. Meade and Robert Eustace

(From The Strand magazine, December 1902.)

If Madame Sara had one prerogative more than another it was that of taking people unawares. When least expected she would spring a mine at your feet, engulf you in a most horrible danger, stab you in the dark, or injure you through your best friend; in short, this dangerous woman was likely to become the terror of London if steps were not soon taken to place her in such confinement that her genius could no longer assert itself.

Months went by after my last adventure. Once again my fears slumbered. Madame Sara's was not the first name that I thought of when I awoke in the morning, nor the last to visit my dreams at night. Absorbed in my profession, I had little time to waste upon her. After all, I made up my mind, she might have left London; she might have carried her machinations, her cruelties, and her genius elsewhere.

That such was not the case this story quickly shows.

The matter which brought Madame Sara once again to the fore began in the following way.

On the 17th of July, 1900, I received a letter; it ran as follows:--

"23, West Terrace,

"Charlton Road, Putney.

"DEAR MR. DRUCE,--I am in considerable difficulty and am writing to beg for your advice. My father died a fortnight ago at his castle in Portugal, leaving me his heiress. His brother-in-law, who lived there with him, arrived in London yesterday and came to see me, bringing me full details of my father's death. These are in the last degree mysterious and terrifying. There are also a lot of business affairs to arrange. I know little about business and should greatly value your advice on the whole situation. Can you come here and see me to-morrow at three o'clock? Senhor de Castro, my uncle, my mother's brother, will be here, and I should like you to meet him. If you can come I shall be very grateful.--Yours sincerely,

"HELEN SHERWOOD."

I replied to this letter by telegram:---

"Will be with you at three to-morrow."

Helen Sherwood was an old friend of mine; that is, I had known her since she was a child. She was now about twenty-three years of age, and was engaged to a certain Godfrey Despard, one of the best fellows I ever met. Despard was employed in a merchant's office in Shanghai, and the chance of immediate marriage was small. Nevertheless, the young people were determined to be true to each other and to wait that turn in the tide which comes to most people who watch for it.

Helen's life had been a sad one. Her mother, a Portuguese lady of good family, had died at her birth; her father, Henry Sherwood, had gone to Lisbon in 1860 as one of the Under-Secretaries to the Embassy and never cared to return to England. After the death of his wife he had lived as an eccentric recluse. When Helen was three years old he had sent her home, and she had been brought up by a maiden aunt of her father's, who had never understood the impulsive,

eager girl, and had treated her with a rare want of sympathy. This woman had died when her young charge was sixteen years of age. She had left no money behind her, and, as her father declined to devote one penny to his daughter's maintenance, Helen had to face the world before her education was finished. But her character was full of spirit and determination. She stayed on at school as pupil teacher, and afterwards supported herself by her attainments. She was a good linguist, a clever musician, and had one of the most charming voices I ever heard in an amateur. When this story opens she was earning a comfortable independence, and was even saving a little money for that distant date when she would marry the man she loved.

Meanwhile Sherwood's career was an extraordinary one. He had an extreme stroke of fortune in drawing the first prize of the Grand Christmas State Lottery in Lisbon, amounting to one hundred and fifty million reis, representing in English money thirty thousand pounds. With this sum he bought an old castle in the Estrella Mountains, and, accompanied by his wife's brother, a certain Petro de Castro, went there to live. He was hated by his fellow-men and, with the exception of De Castro, he had no friends. The old castle was said to be of extraordinary beauty, and was known as Castello Mondego. It was situated some twenty miles beyond the old Portuguese town of Coimbra. The historical accounts of the place were full of interest, and its situation was marvellously romantic, being built on the heights above the Mondego River. The castle dated from the twelfth century, and had seen brave and violent deeds. It was supposed to be haunted by an old monk who was said to have been murdered there, but within living memory no one had seen him. At least, so Helen had informed me.

Punctually at three o'clock on the following day I found myself at West Terrace, and was shown into my young friend's pretty little sitting-

room.

"How kind of you to come, Mr. Druce!" she said. "May I introduce you to my uncle, Senhor de Castro?"

The Senhor, a fine-looking man, who spoke English remarkably well, bowed, gave a gracious smile, and immediately entered into conversation. His face had strong features; his beard was iron-grey, so also were his hair and moustache. He was slightly bald about the temples. I imagined him to be a man about forty-five years of age.

"Now," said Helen, after we had talked to each other for a few minutes, "perhaps, Uncle Petro, you will explain to Mr. Druce what has happened."

As she spoke I noticed that her face was very pale and that her lips slightly trembled.

"It is a painful story," said the Portuguese, "most horrible and inexplicable."

I prepared myself to listen, and he continued:--

"For the last few months my dear friend had been troubled in his mind. The reason appeared to me extraordinary. I knew that Sherwood was eccentric, but he was also matter-of-fact, and I should have thought him the last man who would be likely to be a prey to nervous terrors. Nevertheless, such was the case. The old castle has the reputation of being haunted, and the apparition that is supposed to trouble Mondego is that of a ghastly white face that is now and then seen at night peering out through some of the windows or one of the embrasures of the battlements surrounding the courtyard. It is said to be the shade of an abbot who was foully murdered there by a Castilian nobleman who owned the castle a hundred years ago.

"It was late in April of this year when my brother-in-law first declared that he saw the apparition. I shall never forget his terror. He came to me in my room, woke me, and pointed out the embrasure where he had seen it. He described it as a black figure leaning out of a window, with an appallingly horrible white face, with wide-open eyes apparently staring at nothing. I argued with him and tried to appeal to his common sense, and did everything in my power to bring him to reason, but without avail. His terror grew worse and worse. He could think and talk of nothing else, and, to make matters worse, he collected all the old literature he could find bearing on the legend. This he would read, and repeat the ghastly information to me at meal times. I began to fear that his mind would become affected, and three weeks ago I persuaded him to come away with me for a change to Lisbon. He agreed, but the very night before we were to leave I was awakened in the small hours by hearing an awful cry, followed by another, and then the sound of my own name. I ran out into the courtyard and looked up at the battlements. There I saw, to my horror, my brother-in-law rushing along the edge, screaming as though in extreme terror, and evidently imagining that he was pursued by something. The next moment he dashed headlong down a hundred feet on to the flagstones by my side, dying instantaneously. Now comes the most horrible part. As I glanced up I saw, and I swear it with as much certainty as I am now speaking to you, a black figure leaning out over the battlement exactly at the spot from which he had fallen--a figure with a ghastly white face, which stared straight down at me. The moon was full, and gave the face a clearness that was unmistakable. It was large, round, and smooth, white with a whiteness I had never seen on human face, with eyes widely open, and a fixed stare; the face was rigid and tense; the mouth shut and drawn at the corners. Fleeting as the glance was, for it vanished almost the next moment, I shall never forget it. It is indelibly imprinted on my memory."

He ceased speaking.

From my long and constant contact with men and their affairs, I knew at once that what De Castro had just said instantly raised the whole matter out of the commonplace; true or untrue, real or false, serious issues were at stake.

"Who else was in the castle that night?" I asked

"No one," was his instant reply. "Not even old Gonsalves, our one man-servant. He had gone to visit his people in the mountains about ten miles off. We were absolutely alone."

"You know Mr. Sherwood's affairs pretty well?" I went on. "On the supposition of trickery, could there be any motive that you know of for anyone to play such a ghastly trick?"

"Absolutely none."

"You never saw the apparition before this occasion?"

"Never."

"And what were your next steps?"

"There was nothing to be done except to carry poor Sherwood indoors. He was buried on the following day. I made every effort to have a systematic inquiry set on foot, but the castle is in a remote spot and the authorities are slow to move. The Portuguese doctor gave his sanction to the burial after a formal inquiry. Deceased was testified as having committed suicide while temporarily insane, but to investigate the apparition they absolutely declined."

"And now," I said, "will you tell me what you can with regard to the disposition of the property?"

"The will is a very remarkable one," replied De Castro. "Senhor Sousa, my brother-in-law's lawyer, holds it. Sherwood died a much richer man than I had any idea of. This was owing to some very successful speculations. The real and personal estate amounts to seventy thousand pounds, but the terms of the will are eccentric. Henry Sherwood's passionate affection for the old castle was quite morbid, and the gist of the conditions of the will is this: Helen is to live on the property, and if she does, and as long as she does, she is to receive the full interest on forty thousand pounds, which is now invested in good English securities. Failing this condition, the property is to be sold, and the said forty thousand pounds is to go to a Portuguese charity in Lisbon. I also have a personal interest in the will. This I knew from Sherwood himself. He told me that his firm intention was to retain the castle in the family for his daughter, and for her son if she married. He earnestly begged of me to promote his wishes in the event of his dying. I was not to leave a stone unturned to persuade Helen to live at the castle, and in order to ensure my carrying out his wishes he bequeathed to me the sum of ten thousand pounds provided Helen lives at Castello Mondego. If she does not do so I lose the money. Hence my presence here and my own personal anxiety to clear up the mystery of my friend's death, and to see my niece installed as owner of the most lovely and romantic property in the Peninsula. It has, of course, been my duty to give a true account of the mystery surrounding my unhappy brother-in-law's death, and I sincerely trust that a solution to this terrible mystery will be found, and that Helen will enter into her beautiful possessions with all confidence."

"The terms of the will are truly eccentric," I said. Then turning to Helen I added:--

"Surely you can have no fear in living at Castello Mondego when it would be the means of bringing about the desire of your heart?"

"Does that mean that you are engaged to be married, Helen?" asked De Castro.

"It does," she replied. Then she turned to me. "I am only human, and a woman. I could not live at Castello Mondego with this mystery unexplained; but I am willing to take every step--yes, every step, to find out the truth."

"Let me think over the case," I said, after a pause. "Perhaps I may be able to devise some plan for clearing up this unaccountable matter. There is no man in the whole of London better fitted to grapple with the mystery than I, for it is, so to speak, my profession."

"You will please see in me your hearty collaborator, Mr. Druce," said Senhor de Castro.

"When do you propose to return to Portugal?" I asked.

"As soon as I possibly can."

Where are you staying now?"

"At the Cecil."

He stood up as he spoke.

"I am sorry to have to run away," he said. "I promised to meet a friend, a lady, in half an hour from now. She is a very busy woman, and I must not keep her waiting."

His words were commonplace enough, but I noticed a queer change in his face. His eyes grew full of eagerness, and yet--was it possible? --a curious fear seemed also to fill them. He shook hands with Helen, bowed to me, and hurriedly left the room.

"I wonder whom he is going to meet," she said, glancing out of the window and watching his figure as he walked down the street. "He told me when he first came that he had an interview pending of a very important character. But, there, I must not keep you, Mr. Druce; you are also a very busy man. Before you go, however, do tell me what you think of the whole thing. I certainly cannot live at the castle while that ghastly face is unexplained; but at the same time I do not wish to give up the property."

"You shall live there, enjoy the property, and be happy," I answered. "I will think over everything; I am certain we shall see a way out of the mystery."

I wrung her hand and hurried away.

During the remainder of the evening this extraordinary case occupied my thoughts to the exclusion of almost everything else. I made up my mind to take it up, to set every inquiry on foot, and, above all things, to ascertain if there was a physical reason for the apparition's appearance; in short, if Mr. Sherwood's awful death was for the benefit of any living person. But I must confess that, think as I would, I could not see the slightest daylight until I remembered the curious expression of De Castro's face when he spoke of his appointment with a lady. The man had undoubtedly his weak point; he had his own private personal fear. What was its nature?

I made a note of the circumstance and determined to speak to Vandeleur about it when I had a chance.

The next morning one of the directors of our agency called. He and I had a long talk over business matters, and when he was leaving he asked me when I wished to take my holiday.

"If you like to go away for a fortnight or three weeks, now is your

time," was his final remark.

I answered without a moment's hesitation that I should wish to go to Portugal, and would take advantage of the leave of absence which he offered me.

Now, it had never occurred to me to think of visiting Portugal until that moment; but so strongly did the idea now take possession of me that I went at once to the Cecil and had an interview with De Castro. I told him that I could not fulfil my promise to Miss Sherwood without being on the spot, and I should therefore accompany him when he returned to Lisbon. His face expressed genuine delight, and before we parted we arranged to meet at Charing Cross on the morning after the morrow. I then hastened to Putney to inform Helen Sherwood of my intention.

To my surprise I saw her busy placing different articles of her wardrobe in a large trunk which occupied the place of honour in the centre of the little sitting-room.

"What are you doing?" I cried.

She coloured.

"You must not scold me," she said. "There is only one thing to do, and I made up my mind this morning to do it. The day after to-morrow I am going to Lisbon. I mean to investigate the mystery for myself."

"You are a good, brave girl," I cried. "But listen, Helen; it is not necessary."

I then told her that I had unexpectedly obtained a few weeks' holiday and that I intended to devote the time to her service.

"Better and better," she cried. "I go with you. Nothing could have been planned more advantageously for me."

"What put the idea into your head?" I asked.

"It isn't my own," she said. "I spent a dreadful night, and this morning, soon after ten o'clock, I had an unexpected visitor. She is not a stranger to me, although I have never mentioned her name. She is known as Madame Sara, and is----"

"My dear Helen!" I cried. "You don't mean to tell me you know that woman? She is one of the most unscrupulous in the whole of London. You must have nothing to do with her--nothing whatever."

Helen opened her eyes to their widest extent.

"You misjudge Madame Sara," she said. "I have known her for the last few years, and she has been a most kind friend to me. She has got me more than one good post as teacher, and I have always felt a warm admiration for her. She is, beyond doubt, the most unselfish woman I ever met."

I shook my head.

"You will not get me to alter my opinion of her," continued Helen. "Think of her kindness in calling to see me to-day. She drove here this morning just because she happened to see my uncle, Petro de Castro, yesterday. She has known him, too, for some time. She had a talk with him about me, and he told her all about the strange will. She was immensely interested, and said that it was imperative for me to investigate the matter myself. She spoke in the most sensible way, and said finally that she would not leave me until I had promised to go to Portugal to visit the castle, and in my own person to unearth the mystery. I promised her and felt she was right. I am keeping my

word."

When Helen had done speaking I remained silent. I could scarcely describe the strange sensation which visited me. Was it possible that the fear which I had seen so strongly depicted on De Castro's face was caused by Madame Sara? Was the mystery in the old Portuguese castle also connected with this terrible woman? If so, what dreadful revelations might not be before us! Helen was not the first innocent girl who believed in Madame, and not the first whose life was threatened.

"Why don't you speak, Mr. Druce?" she asked me at last. "What are you thinking of?"

"I would rather not say what I am thinking of," I answered; "but I am very glad of one thing, and that is that I am going with you."

"You are my kindest, best friend," she said; "and now I will tell you one thing more. Madame said that the fact of your being one of the party put all danger out of the case so far as I was concerned, for she knew you to be the cleverest man she ever met."

"Ah!" I replied, slowly, "there is a cleverer man than I, and his name is Eric Vandeleur. Did she happen to speak of him?"

"No. Who is he? I have never heard of him."

"I will tell you some day," I replied, "but not now."

I rose, bade her a hasty good-bye, and went straight to Vandeleur's rooms.

Whatever happened, I had made up my mind to consult him in the matter. He was out when I called, but I left a note, and he came round

to my place in the course of the evening.

In less than a quarter of an hour I put him in possession of all the facts. He received my story in silence.

"Well!" I cried at last. "What do you think?"

"There is but one conclusion, Druce," was his reply. "There is a motive in this mystery--method in this madness. Madame is mixed up in it. That being the case, anything supernatural is out of the question. I am sorry Miss Sherwood is going to Lisbon, but the fact that you are going too may be her protection. Beyond doubt her life is in danger. Well, you must do your best, and forewarned is forearmed. I should like to go with you, but I cannot. Perhaps I may do more good here watching the arch-fiend who is pulling the strings."

De Castro took the information quietly that his niece was about to accompany us.

"Women are strange creatures," he said. "Who would suppose that a delicate girl would subject herself to the nervous terrors she must undergo in the castle? Well, let her come--it may be best, and my friend, the lady about whom I spoke to you, recommended it."

"You mean Madame Sara?" I said.

"Ah!" he answered, with a start. "Do you know her?"

"Slightly," I replied, in a guarded tone. Then I turned the conversation.

Our journey took place without adventure, and when we got to Lisbon we put up at Durrand's Hotel.

On the afternoon of that same day we went to interview Manuel Sousa, the lawyer who had charge of Mr. Sherwood's affairs. His

office was in the Rue do Rio Janeiro. He was a short, bright-eyed little man, having every appearance of honesty and ability. He received us affably and looked with much interest at Helen Sherwood, whose calm, brave face and English appearance impressed him favourably.

"So you have come all this long way, Senhora," he said, "to investigate the mystery of your poor father's death? Be assured I will do everything in my power to help you. And now you would all like to see the documents and papers. Here they are at your service."

He opened a tin box and lifted out a pile of papers. Helen went up to one of the windows.

"I don't understand Portuguese," she said. "You will examine them for me, won't you, Uncle Petro, and you also, Mr. Druce?"

I had a sufficient knowledge of Portuguese to be able to read the will, and I quickly discovered that De Castro's account of it was quite correct.

"Is it your intention to go to Castello Mondego?" asked the lawyer, when our interview was coming to an end.

"I can answer for myself that I intend to go," I replied.

"It will give me great pleasure to take Mr. Druce to that romantic spot," said De Castro.

"And I go with you," cried Helen.

"My dear, dear young lady," said the lawyer, a flicker of concern crossing his bright eyes, "is that necessary? You will find the castle very lonely and not prepared for the reception of a lady."

"Even so, I have come all this long way to visit it," replied Helen. "I go with my friend, Mr. Druce, and with my uncle, and so far as I am concerned the sooner we get there the better."

The lawyer held up his hands. "I wouldn't sleep in that place," he exclaimed, "for twenty contos of reis."

"Then you really believe in the apparition?" I said. "You think it is supernatural?"

He involuntarily crossed himself.

"The tale is an old one," he said. "It has been known for a hundred years that the castle is haunted by a monk who was treacherously murdered there. That is the reason, Miss Sherwood, why your father got it so cheap."

"Supernatural or not, I must get to the bottom of the thing," she said, in a low voice.

De Castro jumped up, an impatient expression crossing his face.

"If you don't want me for the present, Druce," he said. "I have some business of my own that I wish to attend to."

He left the office, and Helen and I were about to follow him when Senhor Sousa suddenly addressed me.

"By the way, Mr. Druce, I am given to understand that you are from the Solvency Inquiry Agency of London. I know that great business well; I presume, therefore, that matters of much interest depend upon this inquiry?"

"The interests are great," I replied, "but are in no way connected with

my business. My motive in coming here is due to friendship. This young lady is engaged to be married to a special friend of mine, and I have known her personally from her childhood. If we can clear up the present mystery, Helen Sherwood's marriage can take place at once. If, on the other hand, that terror which hangs over Castello Mondego is so overpowering that Miss Sherwood cannot make up her mind to live there, a long separation awaits the young pair. I have answered your question, Senhor Sousa; will you, on your part, answer mine?"

"Certainly," he replied. His face looked keenly interested, and from time to time he glanced from Helen to me.

"Are you aware of the existence of any motive which would induce someone to personate the apparition and so bring about Mr. Sherwood's death?"

"I know of no such motive, my dear sir. Senhor de Castro will come into ten thousand pounds provided, and only provided, Miss Sherwood takes possession of the property. He is the one and only person who benefits under the will, except Miss Sherwood herself."

"We must, of course, exclude Senhor de Castro," I answered. "His conduct has been most honourable in the matter throughout; he might have been tempted to suppress the story of the ghost, which would have been to his obvious advantage. Is there no one else whom you can possibly suspect?"

"No one--absolutely no one."

"Very well; my course is clear. I have come here to get an explanation of the mystery. When it is explained Miss Sherwood will take possession of the castle."

"And should you fail, sir? Ghosts have a way of suppressing

themselves when most earnestly desired to put in an appearance."

"I don't anticipate failure, Senhor Sousa, and I mean to go to the castle immediately."

"We are a superstitious race," he replied, "and I would not go there for any money you liked to offer me."

"I am an Englishman, and this lady is English on her father's side. We do not easily abandon a problem when we set to work to solve it."

"What do you think of it all?" asked Helen of me, when we found ourselves soon afterwards in the quaint, old-world streets.

"Think!" I answered. "Our course is clear. We have got to discover the motive. There must be a motive. There was someone who had a grudge against the old man, and who wished to terrify him out of the world. As to believing that the apparition is supernatural, I decline even to allow myself to consider it."

"Heaven grant that you may be right," she answered; "but I must say a strange and most unaccountable terror oppresses me whenever I conjure up that ghastly face."

"And yet you have the courage to go to the castle!"

"It is a case of duty, not of courage, Mr. Druce."

For the rest of that day I thought over the whole problem, looking at it from every point of view, trying to gaze at it with fresh eyes, endeavouring to discover the indiscoverable--the motive. There must be a motive. We should find it at the castle. We would go there on the morrow. But, no; undue haste was unnecessary. It might be well for me, helped as I should be by my own agency, a branch of which was

to be found in Lisbon, to discover amongst the late Mr. Sherwood's acquaintances, friends, or relatives the motive that I wanted. My agents set to work for me, but though they did their utmost no discovery of the least value was found, and at the end of a week I told De Castro and Helen that I was ready to start.

"We will go early to-morrow morning," I said. "You must make all your preparations, Helen. It will take us the day to reach Castello Mondego. I hope that our work may be completed there, and that we may be back again in Lisbon within the week."

Helen's face lit up with a smile of genuine delight.

"The inaction of the last week has been terribly trying," she said. "But now that we are really going to get near the thing I feel quite cheerful."

"Your courage fills me with admiration," I could not help saying, and then I went out to make certain purchases. Amongst these were three revolvers--one for Helen, one for De Castro, and one for myself.

Afterwards I had an interview with Sousa, and took him as far as I could into my confidence.

"The danger of the supernatural is not worth considering," I said, "but the danger of treachery, of unknown motives, is considerable. I do not deny this fact for a moment. In case you get no tidings of us, come yourself or send some one to the castle within a week."

"This letter came for you by the last post," said Sousa, and he handed me one from Vandeleur.

I opened it and read as follows:--

"I met Madame Sara a week ago at the house of a friend. I spoke to

her about Castello Mondego. She admitted that she was interested in it, that she knew Miss Sherwood, and hoped when she had taken possession to visit her in that romantic spot. I inquired further if she was aware of the contents of the strange will. She said she had heard of it. Her manner was perfectly frank, but I saw that she was uneasy. She took the first opportunity of leaving the house, and on making inquiries I hear that she left London by the first train this morning, en route for the Continent. These facts may mean a great deal, and I should advise you to be more than ever on your guard."

I put the letter into my pocket, got Sousa to promise all that was necessary, and went away.

At an early hour the following morning we left Rocio Station for Coimbra, and it was nearly seven in the evening when we finally came to the end of our railway journey and entered a light wagonette drawn by two powerful bay stallions for our twenty-mile drive to the castle.

The scenery as we approached the spurs of the Estrella was magnificent beyond description, and as I gazed up at the great peaks, now bathed in the purples and golds of the sunset, the magic and mystery of our strange mission became tenfold intensified. Presently the steep ascent began along a winding road between high walls that shut out our view, and by the time we reached the castle it was too dark to form any idea of its special features.

De Castro had already sent word of our probable arrival, and when we rang the bell at the old castle a phlegmatic-looking man opened the door for us.

"Ah, Gonsalves," cried De Castro, "here we are! I trust you have provided comfortable beds and a good meal, for we are all as hungry as hawks."

The old man shrugged his shoulders, raised his beetle-brows a trifle, and fixed his eyes on Helen with some astonishment. He muttered, in a Portuguese dialect which I did not in the least comprehend, something to De Castro, who professed himself satisfied. Then he, said something further, and I noticed the face of my Portuguese friend turn pale.

"Gonsalves saw the spectre three nights ago," he remarked, turning to me. "It was leaning as usual out of one of the windows of the north-west turret. But, come; we must not terrify ourselves the moment we enter your future home, Niece Helen. You are doubtless hungry. Shall we go to the banqueting-hall?"

The supper prepared for us was not appetizing, consisting of some miserable goatchops, and in the great hall, dimly lighted by a few candles in silver sconces, we could scarcely see each other's faces. As supper was coming to an end I made a suggestion.

"We have come here," I said, "on a serious matter. We propose to start an investigation of a very grave character. It is well known that ghosts prefer to reveal themselves to one man or woman alone, and not to a company. I propose, therefore, that we three should occupy rooms as far as possible each from the other in the castle, and that the windows of our three bedrooms should command the centre square."

De Castro shrugged his shoulders and a look of dismay spread for a moment over his face; but Helen fixed her great eyes on mine, her lips moved slightly as though she would speak, then she pulled herself together.

"You are right, Mr. Druce," she said. "Having come on this inquiry, we must fear nothing."

"Well, come at once, and we will choose our bedrooms. You as the lady shall have the first choice."

De Castro called Gonsalves, who appeared holding a lantern in his hand. A few words were said to the man in his own dialect, and he led the way, going up many stone stairs, down many others, and at last he flung open a huge oak door and we found ourselves in a vast chamber with five windows, all mullioned and sunk in deep recesses. On the floor was a heavy carpet. A four-post bed-head with velvet hangings was in a recess. The rest of the furniture was antique and massive, nearly black with age, but relieved by brass mountings, which, strange to say, were bright as though they had recently been rubbed.

"This was poor Sherwood's own bedroom," said De Castro. "Do you mind sleeping here?"

He turned to Helen.

"No, I should like it," she replied, emphatically.

"I am glad that this is your choice," he said, "for I don't believe, although I am a man and you are a woman, that I could myself endure this room. It was here I watched by his dead body. Ah, poor fellow, I loved him well."

"We won't talk of memories to-night," said Helen. "I am very tired, and I believe I shall sleep. Strange as it may sound, I am not afraid. Mr. Druce, where will you locate yourself? I should like, at least, to know what room you will be in."

I smiled at her. Her bravery astonished me. I selected a room at right angles to Helen's. Standing in one of her windows she could, if

necessary, get a glimpse of me if I were to stand in one of mine.

De Castro chose a room equally far away from Helen's on the other side. We then both bade the girl good-night.

"I hate to leave her so far from help," I said, glancing at De Castro.

"Nothing will happen," he replied. "I can guarantee that. I am dead tired; the moment I lay my head on my pillow, ghost or no ghost, I shall sleep till morning."

He hurried off to his own room.

The chamber that I had selected was vast, lofty, and might have accommodated twenty people. I must have been more tired even than I knew, for I fell asleep when my head touched the pillow.

When I awoke it was dawn, and, eager to see my surroundings by the light of day, I sprang up, dressed, and went down to the courtyard. Three sides of this court were formed by the castle buildings, but along the fourth ran a low balustrade of stone. I sauntered towards it. I shall never forget the loveliness of the scene that met my eyes. I stood upon what was practically a terrace--a mere shelf on the scarping of rock on the side of a dizzy cliff that went down below me a sheer two thousand feet. The Mondego River ran with a swift rushing noise at the foot of the gorge, although at the height at which I stood it looked more like a thread of silver than any thing else. Towering straight in front of me, solemnly up into the heavens, stood the great peak of the Serra da Estrella, from which in the rosy sunrise the morning clouds were rolling into gigantic white wreaths. Behind me was the great irregular pile of the castle, with its battlements, turrets, and cupolas, hoar and grey with the weight of centuries, but now transfigured and bathed in the golden light. I had just turned to glance at them when I saw De Castro approaching me.

"Surely," I said, "there never was such a beautiful place in the world before! We can never let it go out of the family. Helen shall live here."

De Castro came close to me; he took my arm, and pointed to a spot on the stone flags.

"On this very spot her father fell from the battlements above," he said, slowly.

I shuddered, and all pleasant thoughts were instantly dispelled by the memory of that hideous tragedy and the work we had still to do. It seemed impossible in this radiant, living sunlight to realize the horror that these walls had contained, and might still contain. At some of these very windows the ghastly face had appeared.

Helen, De Castro, and I spent the whole day exploring the castle. We went from dungeons to turrets, and made elaborate plans for alternate nightly vigils. One of the first things that I insisted on was that Gonsalves should not sleep in the castle at night. This was easily arranged, the old man having friends in the neighbouring village. Thus the only people in the castle after nightfall would be De Castro, Helen, and myself.

After we had locked old Gonsalves out and had raised the portcullis, we again went the complete round of the entire place. Thus we ensured that no one else could be hiding in the precincts. Finally we placed across every entrance thin silken threads which would be broken if anyone attempted to pass them.

Helen was extremely anxious that the night should be divided into three portions, and that she should share the vigils; but this both De Castro and I prohibited.

"At least for to-night," I said. "Sleep soundly; trust the matter to us. Believe me, this will be best. All arrangements are made. Your uncle will patrol until one o'clock in the morning, then I will go on duty."

This plan was evidently most repugnant to her, and when De Castro left the room she came up and began to plead with me.

"I have a strange and overpowering sensation of terror," she said. "Fight as I will, I cannot get rid of it. I would much rather be up than in that terrible room. I slept last night because I was too weary to do anything else, but I am wakeful to-night, and I shall not close my eyes. Let me share your watch at least. Let us pace the courtyard side by side."

"No," I answered, "that would not do. If two of us are together the ghost, or whatever human being poses as the ghost, will not dare to put in an appearance. We must abide by our terrible mission, Helen; each must watch alone. You will go to bed now, like a good girl, and to-morrow night, if we have not then discovered anything, you will be allowed to take your share in the night watch."

"Very well," she answered.

She sighed impatiently, and after a moment she said:--

"I have a premonition that something will happen to-night. As a rule my premonitions come right."

I made no answer, but I could not help giving her a startled glance. It is one thing to be devoid of ghostly terrors when living in practical London, surrounded by the world and the ways of men, but it is another thing to be proof against the strange terror which visits all human beings more or less when they are alone, when it is night, when the heart beats low. Then we are apt to have distorted visions,

our mental equilibrium is upset, and we fear we know not what.

Helen and I knew that there was something to fear, and as our eyes met we dared not speak of what was uppermost in our thoughts. I could not find De Castro, and presumed that he had taken up his watch without further ado. I therefore retired to my own room and prepared to sleep. But the wakefulness which had seized Helen was also mine, for when the Portuguese entered my bedroom at one o'clock I was wide awake.

"You have seen nothing?" I said to him.

"Nothing," he answered, cheerfully. "The moon is bright, the night is glorious. It is my opinion that the apparition will not appear."

"I will take the precaution to put this in my pocket," I said, and I took up my revolver, which was loaded.

As I stepped out into the courtyard I found that the brilliant moonlight had lit up the north-west wall and the turrets; but the sharp black shadow of the south wall lay diagonally across the yard. Absolute stillness reigned, broken only by the croaking of thousands of frogs from the valley below. I sat down on a stone bench by the balustrade and tried to analyze my feelings. For a time the cheerfulness which I had seen so marked on De Castro's face seemed to have communicated itself to me; my late fears vanished, I was not even nervous, I found it difficult to concentrate my thoughts on the object which had brought me so far from England. My mind wandered back to London and to my work there. But by degrees, as the chill stole over me and the stillness of night began to embrace me, I found myself glancing ever and again at those countless windows and deep embrasures, while a queer, overpowering tension began to be felt, and against my own will a terror, strange and humiliating, overpowered me. I knew that it was stronger than I, and, fight against

it as I would, I could not overcome it. The instinctive dread of the unknown that is at the bottom of the bravest man's courage was over me. Each moment it increased, and I felt that if the hideous face were to appear at one of the windows I would not be answerable for my self-control. Suddenly, as I sat motionless, my eyes riveted on the windows of the old castle, I felt, or fancied I felt, that I was not alone. It seemed to me that a shadow moved down in the courtyard and close to me. I looked again; it was coming towards me. It was with difficulty I could suppress the scream which almost rose to my lips. The next instant I was glad that I had not lost my self-control, when the slim, cold hand of Helen Sherwood touched mine.

"Come," she said, softly.

She took my hand and, without a word, led me across the courtyard.

"Look up," she said.

I did look up, and then my heart seemed to stop and every muscle in my body grew rigid as though from extreme cold. At one of the first-floor windows in the north-west tower, there in the moonlight leant the apparition itself: a black, solemn figure--its arms crossed on the sill--a large, round face of waxy whiteness, features immobile and fixed in a hideous, unwinking stare right across the courtyard.

My heart gave a stab of terror, then I remained absolutely rigid--I forgot the girl by my side in the wild beating of my pulse. It seemed to me that it must beat itself to death.

"Call my uncle," whispered Helen, and when I heard her voice I knew that the girl was more self-possessed than I was.

"Call him," she said again, "loudly--at once."

I shouted his name:--

"De Castro, De Castro; it is here!"

The figure vanished at my voice.

"Go," said Helen again. "Go; I will wait for you here. Follow it at once."

I rushed up the stairs towards the room where De Castro slept. I burst open his door. The room was empty. The next instant I heard his voice.

"I am here--here," he said. "Come at once---quick!"

In a moment I was at his side.

"This is the very room where it stood," I said.

I ran to the window and looked down. De Castro followed me. Helen had not moved. She was still gazing up--the moonlight fell full on her white face.

"You saw it too?" gasped De Castro.

"Yes," I said, "and so did Helen. It stood by this window."

"I was awake," he said, "and heard your shout. I rushed to my window; I saw the spectre distinctly, and followed it to this room. You swear you saw it? It was the face of the abbot."

My brain was working quickly, my courage was returning. The unfathomable terror of the night scene was leaving me. I took De Castro suddenly by both his arms and turned him round so that the moonlight should fall upon him.

"You and I are alone in this tower. Helen Sherwood is in the courtyard. There is not another living being in the whole castle. Now listen. There are only two possible explanations of what has just occurred. Either you are the spectre, or it is supernatural."

"I?" he cried. "Are you mad?"

"I well might be," I answered, bitterly. "But of this I am certain: you must prove to me whether you are the apparition or not. I make this suggestion now in order to clear you from all possible blame; I make it that we may have absolute evidence that could not be upset before the most searching tribunal. Will you now strip before me?---yes, before you leave the room, and prove that you have no mask hidden anywhere on you. If you do this I shall be satisfied. Pardon my insistence, but in a case like the present there must be no loophole."

"Of course, I understand you," he said. "I will remove my clothes."

In five minutes he had undressed and dressed again. There was no treachery on his part. There was no mask nor any possible means of his simulating that face on his person.

"There is no suspicion about you," I said, almost with bitterness. "By heavens, I wish there were. The awfulness of this thing will drive me mad. Look at that girl standing by herself in the courtyard. I must return to her. Think of the courage of a woman who would stand there alone."

He made no answer. I saw that he was shivering.

"Why do you tremble?" I said, suddenly.

"Because of the nameless fear," he replied. "Remember I saw her father--I saw him with the terror on him--he ran along the battlements;

he threw himself over--he died. He was dashed to pieces on the very spot where she is standing. Get her to come in, Druce."

"I will go and speak to her," I said.

I went back to the courtyard. I rejoined Helen, and in a few words told her what had occurred.

"You must come in now," I said. "You will catch your death of cold standing here."

She smiled, a slow, enigmatic sort of smile.

"I have not given up the solution yet," she said, "nor do I mean to."

As she spoke she took her revolver from her belt, and I saw that she was strangely excited. Her manner showed intense excitement, but no fear.

"I suspect foul play," she said. "As I stood here and watched you and Uncle Petro talking to each other by that window I felt convinced--I am more than ever convinced----"

She broke off suddenly.

"Look!--oh, Heaven, look! What is that?"

She had scarcely uttered the words before the same face appeared at another window to the right. Helen gave a sharp cry, and the next instant she covered the awful face with her revolver and fired. A shrill scream rang out on the night air.

"It is human after all," said Helen; "I thought it was. Come."

She rushed up the winding stairs; I followed. The door of the room

where we had seen the spectre was open. We both dashed in. Beneath the window lay a dark huddled heap with the moonlight shining on it, and staring up with the same wide-open eyes was the face of the abbot. Just for a moment neither Helen nor I dared to approach it, but after a time we cautiously drew near the dark mass. The figure never moved. I ran forward and stretched out my hand. Closer and closer I bent until my hand touched the face. It was human flesh and was still warm.

"Helen," I said, turning to the girl, "go at once and find your uncle."

But I had scarcely uttered the words before Helen burst into a low, choking laugh--the most fearful laugh I had ever heard.

"Look, look!" she said.

For before our eyes the face tilted, foreshortened, and vanished. We were both gazing into the countenance of the man whom we knew as Petro de Castro. His face was bathed in blood and convulsed with pain. I lit the lantern, and as I once more approached I saw, lying on the ground by his side, something hairy which for an instant I did not recognise. The next moment I saw that it was--it explained everything. It was a wig. I bent still nearer, and the whole horrible deception became plain as daylight. for, painted upon the back of the man's perfectly bald head, painted with the most consummate skill, giving the startling illusion of depth and relief, and all the hideous expression that had terrified one man at least out of the world, was the face of the abbot. The wig had completely covered it, and so skilfully was it made that the keenest observer would never have suspected it was one, it being itself slightly bald in order to add to the deception.

There in that dim, bare room, in broken sentences, in a voice that failed as his life passed, De Castro faltered out the story of his sin.

"Yes," he said, "I have tried to deceive you, and Gonsalves aided me. I was mad to risk one more appearance. Bend nearer, both of you; I am dying. Listen.

"Upon this estate, not a league across the valley, I found six months ago alluvial gold in great quantities in the bed of the gully. In the 'Bibliotheca Publica' in Lisbon I had years before got accounts of mines worked by the Phoenicians, and was firmly persuaded that some of the gold still remained. I found it, and to get the full benefit of it I devised the ghastly scheme which you have just discovered. I knew that the castle was supposed to be haunted by the face of an old monk. Sherwood with all his peculiarities was superstitious. Very gradually I worked upon his fears, and then, when I thought the time ripe for my experiment, personated the apparition. It was I who flung him from the battlements with my own hand. I knew that the terms of the will would divert all suspicion from me, and had not your shot, Helen, been so true you would never have come here to live. Well, you have avenged your father and saved yourself at the same time. You will find in the safe in a corner of the banqueting-hall plans and maps of the exact spot where the gold is to be found. I could have worked there for years unsuspected. It is true that I should have lost ten thousand pounds, but I should have gained five times the amount. Between four and five months ago I went to see a special friend of mine in London. She is a woman who stands alone as one of the greatest criminals of her day. She promised at once to aid me, and she suggested, devised, and executed the whole scheme. She made the wig herself, with its strangely-bald appearance so deceptive to the ordinary eye, and she painted the awful face on my bald skull. When you searched me just now you suspected a mask, but I was safe from your detection. To remove or replace the wig was the work of an instant. The woman who had done all this was to share my spoils."

"Her name?" I cried.

"Sara, the Great, the Invincible," he murmured.

As he spoke the words he died.

THE END

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Madam Sara

L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace

Everyone in trade and a good many who are not have heard of Werner's Agency, the Solvency Inquiry Agency for all British trade. Its business is to know the financial condition of all wholesale and retail firms, from Rothschild's to the smallest sweetstuff shop in Whitechapel. I do not say that every firm figures on its books, but by methods of secret inquiry it can discover the status of any firm or individual. It is the great safeguard to British trade and prevents much fraudulent dealing.

Of this agency I, Dixon Druce, was appointed manager in 1890. Since then I have met queer people and seen strange sights, for men do curious things for money in this world.

It so happened that in June, 1899, my business took me to Madeira on an inquiry of some importance. I left the island on the 14th of the month by the *Norham Castle* for Southampton. I embarked after dinner. It was a lovely night, and the strains of the band in the public gardens of Funchal came floating across the star-powdered bay through the warm, balmy air. Then the engine bells rang to 'Full speed ahead', and, flinging a farewell to the fairest island on earth, I turned to the smoking-room in order to light my cheroot.

'Do you want a match, sir?'

The voice came from a slender, young-looking man who stood near the taffrail. Before I could reply he had struck one and held it out to me.

'Excuse me,' he said, as he tossed it overboard, 'but surely I am addressing Mr Dixon Druce?'

'You are, sir,' I said, glancing keenly back at him, 'but you have the advantage of me.'

'Don't you know me?' he responded, 'Jack Selby, Hayward's House, Harrow, 1879.'

'By Jove! so it is,' I cried.

Our hands met in a warm clasp, and a moment later I found myself sitting close to my old friend, who had fagged for me in the bygone days, and whom I had not seen from the moment when I said goodbye to the 'Hill' in the grey mist of a December morning twenty years ago. He was a boy of fourteen then, but nevertheless I recognised him. His face was bronzed and good-looking, his features refined. As a boy Selby had been noted for his grace, his well-shaped head, his clean-cut features; these characteristics still were his, and although he was now slightly past his first youth he was decidedly handsome. He gave me a quick sketch of his history.

'My father left me plenty of money,' he said, 'and The Meadows, our old family place, is now mine. I have a taste for natural history; that taste took me two years ago to South America. I have had my share of strange adventures, and have collected valuable specimens and trophies. I am now on my way home from Para, on the Amazon, having come by a Booth boat to Madeira and changed there to the Castle Line. But why all this talk about myself?' he added, bringing his deck chair a little nearer to mine. 'What about your history, old chap? Are you settled down with a wife and kiddies of your own, or is that dream of your school days fulfilled, and are you the owner of the best private laboratory in London?'

'As to the laboratory,' I said, with a smile, 'you must come and see it. For the rest I am unmarried. Are you?'

'I was married the day before I left Para, and my wife is on board with me.'

'Capital,' I answered. 'Let me hear all about it.'

'You shall. Her maiden name was Dallas; Beatrice Dallas. She is just twenty now. Her father was an Englishman and her mother a Spaniard; neither parent is living. She has an elder sister, Edith, nearly thirty years of age, unmarried, who is on board with us. There is also a step-brother, considerably older than either Edith or Beatrice. I met my wife last year in Para, and at once fell in love. I am the happiest man on earth. It goes without saying that I think her beautiful, and she is also very well off. The story of her wealth is a curious one. Her uncle on the mother's side was an extremely wealthy Spaniard, who made an enormous fortune in Brazil out of diamonds and minerals; he owned several mines. But it is supposed that his wealth turned his brain. At any rate, it seems to have done so as far as the disposal of his money went. He divided the yearly profits and interest between his nephew and his two nieces, but declared that the property itself should never be split up. He has left the whole of it to that one of the three who should survive the others. A perfectly insane arrangement, but not, I believe, unprecedented in Brazil.'

'Very insane,' I echoed. 'What was he worth?'

'Over two million sterling.'

'By Jove!' I cried, 'what a sum! But what about the half-brother?'

'He must be over forty years of age, and is evidently a bad lot. I have never seen him. His sisters won't speak to him or have anything to do

with him. I understand that he is a great gambler; I am further told that he is at present in England, and, as there are certain technicalities to be gone through before the girls can fully enjoy their incomes, one of the first things I must do when I get home is to find him out. He has to sign certain papers, for we shan't be able to put things straight until we get his whereabouts. Some time ago my wife and Edith heard that he was ill, but dead or alive we must know all about him, and as quickly as possible.'

I made no answer, and he continued:

'I'll introduce you to my wife and sister-in-law tomorrow. Beatrice is quite a child compared to Edith, who acts towards her almost like a mother. Bee is a little beauty, so fresh and round and young-looking. But Edith is handsome, too, although I sometimes think she is as vain as a peacock. By the way, Druce, this brings me to another part of my story. The sisters have an acquaintance on board, one of the most remarkable women I have ever met. She goes by the name of Madame Sara, and knows London well. In fact, she confesses to having a shop in the Strand. What she has been doing in Brazil I do not know, for she keeps all her affairs strictly private. But you will be amazed when I tell you what her calling is.'

'What?'I asked.

'A professional beautifier. She claims the privilege of restoring youth to those who consult her. She also declares that she can make quite ugly people handsome. There is no doubt that she is very clever. She knows a little bit of everything, and has wonderful recipes with regard to medicines, surgery, and dentistry. She is a most lovely woman herself, very fair, with blue eyes, an innocent, childlike manner, and quantities of rippling gold hair. She openly confesses that she is very much older than she appears. She looks about five-and-twenty. She seems to have travelled all over the world, and says that by birth she

is a mixture of Indian and Italian, her father having been Italian and her mother Indian. Accompanying her is an Arab, a handsome, picturesque sort of fellow, who gives her the most absolute devotion, and she is also bringing back to England two Brazilians from Para. This woman deals in all sorts of curious secrets, but principally in cosmetics. Her shop in the Strand could, I fancy, tell many a strange history. Her clients go to her there, and she does what is necessary for them. It is a fact that she occasionally performs small surgical operations, and there is not a dentist in London who can vie with her. She confesses quite naively that she holds some secrets for making false teeth cling to the palate that no one knows of. Edith Dallas is devoted to her--in fact, her adoration amounts to idolatry.'

'You give a very brilliant account of this woman,' I said. 'You must introduce me tomorrow.'

'I will,' answered Jack, with a smile. 'I should like your opinion of her. I am right glad I have met you, Druce, it is like old times. When we get to London I mean to put up at my town house in Eaton Square for the remainder of the season. The Meadows shall be re-furnished, and Bee and I will take up our quarters some time in August; then you must come and see us. But I am afraid before I give myself up to mere pleasure I must find that precious brother-in-law, Henry Joachim Silva.'

'If you have any difficulty apply to me,' I said. 'I can put at your disposal, in an unofficial way, of course, agents who would find almost any man in England, dead or alive.' I then proceeded to give Selby a short account of my own business.

'Thanks,' he said presently, 'that is capital. You are the very man we want.'

The next morning after breakfast Jack introduced me to his wife and

sister-in-law. They were both foreign-looking, but very handsome, and the wife in particular had a graceful and uncommon appearance. We had been chatting about five minutes when I saw coming down the deck a slight, rather small woman, wearing a big sun hat.

'Ah, Madame,' cried Selby, 'here you are. I had the luck to meet an old friend on board--Mr Dixon Druce--and I have been telling him all about you. I should like you to know each other. Druce, this lady is Madame Sara, of whom I have spoken to you. Mr Dixon Druce--Madame Sara.'

She bowed gracefully and then looked at me earnestly. I had seldom seen a more lovely woman. By her side both Mrs Selby and her sister seemed to fade into insignificance. Her complexion was almost dazzlingly fair, her face refined in expression, her eyes penetrating, clever, and yet with the innocent, frank gaze of a child. Her dress was very simple; she looked altogether like a young, fresh, and natural girl.

As we sat chatting lightly and about commonplace topics, I instinctively felt that she took an interest in me even greater than might be expected upon an ordinary introduction. By slow degrees she so turned the conversation as to leave Selby and his wife and sister out, and then as they moved away she came a little nearer, and said in a low voice:

'I am very glad we have met, and yet how odd this meeting is! Was it really accidental?'

'I do not understand you,' I answered.

'I know who you are,' she said, lightly. 'You are the manager of Werner's Agency; its business is to know the private affairs of those people who would rather keep their own secrets. Now, Mr Druce, I

am going to be absolutely frank with you. I own a small shop in the Strand--a perfumery shop--and behind those innocent-looking doors I conduct the business which brings me in gold of the realm. Have you, Mr Druce, any objection to my continuing to make a livelihood in perfectly innocent ways?'

'None whatever,' I answered.' You puzzle me by alluding to the subject.'

'I want you to pay my shop a visit when you come to London. I have been away for three or four months. I do wonders for my clients, and they pay me largely for my services. I hold some perfectly innocent secrets which I cannot confide to anybody. I have obtained them partly from the Indians and partly from the natives of Brazil. I have lately been in Para to inquire into certain methods by which my trade can be improved.'

'And your trade is--?' I said, looking at her with amusement and some surprise.

'I am a beautifier,' she said, lightly. She looked at me with a smile. 'You don't want me yet, Mr Druce, but the time may come when even you will wish to keep back the infirmities of years. In the meantime can you guess my age?'

'I will not hazard a guess,' I answered.

'And I will not tell you. Let it remain a secret. Meanwhile, understand that my calling is quite an open one, and I do hold secrets. I should advise you, Mr Druce, even in your professional capacity, not to interfere with them:'

The childlike expression faded from her face as she uttered the last words. There seemed to ring a sort of challenge in her tone. She

turned away after a few moments and I rejoined my friends.

'You have been making acquaintance with Madame Sara, Mr Druce,' said Mrs Selby. 'Don't you think she is lovely?'

'She is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen,' I answered, 'but there seems to be a mystery about her.'

'Oh, indeed there is,' said Edith Dallas, gravely.

'She asked me if I could guess her age,' I continued. 'I did not try, but surely she cannot be more than five-and-twenty.'

'No one knows her age,' said Mrs Selby, 'but I will tell you a curious fact, which, perhaps, you will not believe. She was bridesmaid at my mother's wedding thirty years ago. She declares that she never changes, and has no fear of old age.'

'You mean that seriously?' I cried. 'But surely it is impossible?'

'Her name is on the register, and my mother knew her well. She was mysterious then, and I think my mother got into her power, but of that I am not certain. Anyhow, Edith and I adore her, don't we, Edie?'

She laid her hand affectionately on her sister's arm. Edith Dallas did not speak, but her face was careworn. After a time she said slowly: 'Madame Sara is uncanny and terrible.'

There is, perhaps, no business imaginable--not even a lawyer's--that engenders suspicions more than mine. I hate all mysteries--both in persons and things. Mysteries are my natural enemies; I felt now that this woman was a distinct mystery. That she was interested in me I did not doubt, perhaps because she was afraid of me.

The rest of the voyage passed pleasantly enough. The more I saw of

Mrs Selby and her sister the more I liked them. They were quiet, simple, and straightforward. I felt sure that they were both as good as gold.

We parted at Waterloo, Jack and his wife and her sister going to Jack's house in Eaton Square, and I returning to my quarters in St John's Wood. I had a house there, with a long garden, at the bottom of which was my laboratory, the laboratory that was the pride of my life, it being, I fondly considered, the best private laboratory in London. There I spent all my spare time making experiments and trying this chemical combination and the other, living in hopes of doing great things some day, for Werner's Agency was not to be the end of my career. Nevertheless, it interested me thoroughly, and I was not sorry to get back to my commercial conundrums.

The next day, just before I started to go to my place of business, Jack Selby was announced.

'I want you to help me,' he said. 'I have been already trying in a sort of general way to get information about my brother-in-law, but all in vain. There is no such person in any of the directories. Can you put me on the road to discovery?'

I said I could and would if he would leave the matter in my hands.

'With pleasure,' he replied. 'You see how we are fixed up. Neither Edith nor Bee can get money with any regularity until the man is found. I cannot imagine why he hides himself.'

'I will insert advertisements in the personal columns of the newspapers,' I said, 'and request anyone who can give information to communicate with me at my office. I will also give instructions to all the branches of my firm, as well as to my head assistants in London, to keep their eyes open for any news. You may be quite certain that in

a week or two we shall know all about him.'

Selby appeared cheered at this proposal, and, having begged of me to call upon his wife and her sister as soon as possible, took his leave.

On that very day advertisements were drawn up and sent to several newspapers and inquiry agents; but week after week passed without the slightest result. Selby got very fidgety at the delay. He was never happy except in my presence, and insisted on my coming, whenever I had time, to his house. I was glad to do so, for I took an interest both in him and his belongings, and as to Madame Sara I could not get her out of my head. One day Mrs Selby said to me:

'Have you ever been to see Madame? I know she would like to show you her shop and general surroundings.'

'I did promise to call upon her,' I answered, 'but have not had time to do so yet.'

'Will you come with me tomorrow morning?' asked Edith Dallas, suddenly.

She turned red as she spoke, and the worried, uneasy expression became more marked on her face. I had noticed for some time that she had been looking both nervous and depressed. I had first observed this peculiarity about her on board the *Norham Castle*, but, as time went on, instead of lessening it grew worse. Her face for so young a woman was haggard; she started at each sound, and Madame Sara's name was never spoken in her presence without her evincing almost undue emotion.

'Will you come with me?' she said, with great eagerness.

I immediately promised, and the next day, about eleven o'clock, Edith Dallas and I found ourselves in a hansom driving to Madame Sara's shop. We reached it in a few minutes, and found an unpretentious little place wedged in between a hosier's on one side and a cheap print-seller's on the other. In the windows of the shop were pyramids of perfume bottles, with scintillating facet stoppers tied with coloured ribbons. We stepped out of the hansom and went indoors. Inside the shop were a couple of steps, which led to a door of solid mahogany.

'This is the entrance to her private house,' said Edith, and she pointed to a small brass plate, on which was engraved the name--'Madame Sara, Parfumeuse'. Edith touched an electric bell and the door was immediately opened by a smartly-dressed page-boy. He looked at Miss Dallas as if he knew her very well, and said:

'Madame is within, and is expecting you, miss.'

He ushered us both into a quiet-looking room, soberly but handsomely furnished. He left us, closing the door. Edith turned to me.

'Do you know where we are?' she asked.

'We are standing at present in a small room just behind Madame Sara's shop,' I answered. 'Why are you so excited, Miss Dallas? What is the matter with you?'

'We are on the threshold of a magician's cave,' she replied. 'We shall soon be face to face with the most marvellous woman in the whole of London. There is no one like her.'

'And you--fear her?' I said, dropping my voice to a whisper.

She started, stepped back, and with great difficulty recovered her

composure. At that moment the page-boy returned to conduct us through a series of small waiting-rooms, and we soon found ourselves in the presence of Madame herself.

'Ah!' she said, with a smile. 'This is delightful. You have kept your word, Edith, and I am greatly obliged to you. I will now show Mr Druce some of the mysteries of my trade. But understand, sir,' she added, 'that I shall not tell you any of my real secrets, only as you would like to know something about me you shall.'

'How can you tell I should like to know about you?' I asked.

She gave me an earnest glance which somewhat astonished me, and then she said: 'Knowledge is power; don't refuse what I am willing to give. Edith, you will not object to waiting here while I show Mr Druce through the rooms. First observe this room, Mr Druce. It is lighted only from the roof. When the door shuts it automatically locks itself, so that any intrusion from without is impossible. This is my sanctum sanctorum--a faint odour of perfume pervades the room. This is a hot day, but the room itself is cool. What do you think of it all?'

I made no answer. She walked to the other end and motioned to me to accompany her. There stood a polished oak square table, on which lay an array of extraordinary-looking articles and implements--stoppered bottles full of strange medicaments, mirrors, plane and concave, brushes, sprays, sponges, delicate needle-pointed instruments of bright steel, tiny lancets, and forceps. Facing this table was a chair, like those used by dentists. Above the chair hung electric lights in powerful reflectors, and lenses like bull's-eye lanterns. Another chair, supported on a glass pedestal, was kept there, Madame Sara informed me, for administering static electricity. There were dry-cell batteries for the continuous currents and induction coils for Faradic currents. There were also platinum

needles for burning out the roots of hairs.

Madame took me from this room into another, where a still more formidable array of instruments was to be found. Here were a wooden operating table and chloroform and ether apparatus. When I had looked at everything, she turned to me.

'Now you know,' she said. 'I am a doctor--perhaps a quack. These are my secrets. By means of these I live and flourish.'

She turned her back on me and walked into the other room with the light, springy step of youth. Edith Dallas, white as a ghost, was waiting for us.

'You have done your duty, my child,' said Madame. 'Mr Druce has seen just what I want him to see. I am very much obliged to you both. We shall meet tonight at Lady Farringdon's "At Home". Until then, farewell.'

When we got into the street and were driving back again to Eaton Square, I turned to Edith.

'Many things puzzle me about your friend,' I said, 'but perhaps none more than this. By what possible means can a woman who owns to being the possessor of a shop obtain the entrée to some of the best houses in London? Why does Society open her doors to this woman, Miss Dallas?'

'I cannot quite tell you,' was her reply. 'I only know the fact that wherever she goes she is welcomed and treated with consideration, and wherever she fails to appear there is a universally expressed feeling of regret.'

I had also been invited to Lady Farringdon's reception that evening,

and I went there in a state of great curiosity. There was no doubt that Madame interested me. I was not sure of her. Beyond doubt there was a mystery attached to her, and also, for some unaccountable reason, she wished both to propitiate and defy me. Why was this?

I arrived early, and was standing in the crush near the head of the staircase when Madame was announced. She wore the richest white satin and quantities of diamonds. I saw her hostess bend towards her and talk eagerly. I noticed Madame's reply and the pleased expression that crossed Lady Farringdon's face. A few minutes later a man with a foreign-looking face and long beard sat down before the grand piano. He played a light prelude and Madame Sara began to sing. Her voice was sweet and low, with an extraordinary pathos in it. It was the sort of voice that penetrates to the heart. There was an instant pause in the gay chatter. She sang amidst perfect silence, and when the song had come to an end there followed a furore of applause. I was just turning to say something to my nearest neighbour when I observed Edith Dallas, who was standing close by. Her eyes met mine; she laid her hand on my sleeve.

'The room is hot,' she said, half panting as she spoke. 'Take me out on the balcony.'

I did so. The atmosphere of the reception-rooms was almost intolerable, but it was comparatively cool in the open air.

'I must not lose sight of her,' she said, suddenly.

'Of whom?' I asked, somewhat astonished at her words.

'Of Sara.'

'She is there,' I said. 'You can see her from where you stand.'

We happened to be alone. I came a little closer.

'Why are you afraid of her?' I asked.

'Are you sure that we shall not be heard?' was her answer.

'She terrifies me,' were her next words.

'I will not betray your confidence, Miss Dallas. Will you not trust me? You ought to give me a reason for your fears.'

'I cannot--I dare not; I have said far too much already. Don't keep me, Mr Druce. She must not find us together.' As she spoke she pushed her way through the crowd, and before I could stop her was standing by Madame Sara's side.

The reception in Portland Place was, I remember, on the 26th of July. Two days later the Selbys were to give their final 'At Home' before leaving for the country. I was, of course, invited to be present, and Madame was also there. She had never been dressed more splendidly, nor had she ever before looked younger or more beautiful. Wherever she went all eyes followed her. As a rule her dress was simple, almost like what a girl would wear, but tonight she chose rich Oriental stuffs made of many colours, and absolutely glittering with gems. Her golden hair was studded with diamonds. Round her neck she wore turquoise and diamonds mixed. There were many younger women in the room, but not the youngest nor the fairest had a chance beside Madame. It was not mere beauty of appearance, it was charm--charm which carries all before it.

I saw Miss Dallas, looking slim and tall and pale, standing at a little distance. I made my way to her side. Before I had time to speak she bent towards me.

'Is she not divine?' she whispered. 'She bewilders and delights everyone. She is taking London by storm.'

'Then you are not afraid of her tonight?' I said.

'I fear her more than ever. She has cast a spell over me. But listen, she is going to sing again.'

I had not forgotten the song that Madame had given us at the Farringdons', and stood still to listen. There was a complete hush in the room. Her voice floated over the heads of the assembled guests in a dreamy Spanish song. Edith told me that it was a slumber song, and that Madame boasted of her power of putting almost anyone to sleep who listened to her rendering of it.

'She has many patients who suffer from insomnia,' whispered the girl, 'and she generally cures them with that song, and that alone. Ah! we must not talk; she will hear us.'

Before I could reply, Selby came hurrying up. He had not noticed Edith. He caught me by the arm.

'Come just for a minute into this window, Dixon,' he said. 'I must speak to you. I suppose you have no news with regard to my brother-in-law?'

'Not a word,' I answered.

'To tell you the truth, I am getting terribly put out over the matter. We cannot settle any of our money affairs just because this man chooses to lose himself. My wife's lawyers wired to Brazil yesterday, but even his bankers do not know anything about him.'

'The whole thing is a question of time,' was my answer. 'When are

you off to Hampshire?'

'On Saturday.'

As Selby said the last words he looked around him, then he dropped his voice.

'I want to say something else. The more I see--' he nodded towards Madame Sara--'the less I like her. Edith is getting into a very strange state. Have you not noticed it? And the worst of it is my wife is also infected. I suppose it is that dodge of the woman's for patching people up and making them beautiful. Doubtless the temptation is overpowering in the case of a plain woman, but Beatrice is beautiful herself and young. What can she have to do with cosmetics and complexion pills?'

'You don't mean to tell me that your wife has consulted Madame Sara as a doctor?'

'Not exactly, but she has gone to her about her teeth. She complained of toothache lately, and Madame's dentistry is renowned. Edith is constantly going to her for one thing or another, but then Edith is infatuated.'

As Jack said the last words he went over to speak to someone else, and before I could leave the seclusion of the window I perceived Edith Dallas and Madame Sara in earnest conversation together. I could not help overhearing the following words:

'Don't come to me tomorrow. Get into the country as soon as you can. It is far and away the best thing to do.'

As Madame spoke she turned swiftly and caught my eye. She bowed, and the peculiar look, the sort of challenge, she had given me

before flashed over her face. It made me uncomfortable, and during the night that followed I could not get it out of my head. I remembered what Selby had said with regard to his wife and her money affairs. Beyond doubt he had married into a mystery--a mystery that Madame knew all about. There was a very big money interest, and strange things happen when millions are concerned.

The next morning I had just risen and was sitting at breakfast when a note was handed to me. It came by special messenger, and was marked 'Urgent'. I tore it open. These were its contents:

'My dear Druce, A terrible blow has fallen on us. My sister-in-law, Edith, was taken suddenly ill this morning at breakfast. The nearest doctor was sent for, but he could do nothing, as she died half an hour ago. Do come and see me, and if you know any very clever specialist bring him with you. My wife is utterly stunned by the shock. Yours, Jack Selby.'

I read the note twice before I could realize what it meant. Then I rushed out and, hailing the first hansom I met, said to the man: 'Drive to No. 192, Victoria Street, as quickly as you can.'

Here lived a certain Mr Eric Vandeleur, an old friend of mine and the police surgeon for the Westminster district, which included Eaton Square. No shrewder or sharper fellow existed than Vandeleur, and the present case was essentially in his province, both legally and professionally. He was not at his flat when I arrived, having already gone down to the court. Here I accordingly hurried, and was informed that he was in the mortuary.

For a man who, as it seemed to me, lived in a perpetual atmosphere of crime and violence, of death and coroners' courts, his habitual cheerfulness and brightness of manner were remarkable. Perhaps it was only the reaction from his work, for he had the reputation of being

one of the most astute experts of the day in medical jurisprudence, and the most skilled analyst in toxicological cases on the Metropolitan Police staff. Before I could send him word that I wanted to see him I heard a door bang, and Vandeleur came hurrying down the passage, putting on his coat as he rushed along.

'Halloa!' he cried. 'I haven't seen you for ages. Do you want me?'

'Yes, very urgently,' I answered. 'Are you busy?'

'Head over ears, my dear chap. I cannot give you a moment now, but perhaps later on.'

'What is it? You look excited.'

'I have got to go to Eaton Square like the wind, but come along, if you like, and tell me on the way.'

'Capital,' I cried. 'The thing has been reported then? You are going to Mr Selby's, No. 34a; then I am going with you.'

He looked at me in amazement.

'But the case has only just been reported. What can you possibly know about it?'

'Everything. Let us take this hansom, and I will tell you as we go along.'

As we drove to Eaton Square I quickly explained the situation, glancing now and then at Vandeleur's bright, clean-shaven face. He was no longer Eric Vandeleur, the man with the latest club story and the merry twinkle in his blue eyes: he was Vandeleur the medical jurist, with a face like a mask, his lower jaw slightly protruding and features very fixed.

'The thing promises to be serious,' he replied, as I finished, 'but I can do nothing until after the autopsy. Here we are, and there is my man waiting for me; he has been smart.'

On the steps stood an official-looking man in uniform, who saluted.

'Coroner's officer,' explained Vandeleur.

We entered the silent, darkened house. Selby was standing in the hall. He came to meet us. I introduced him to Vandeleur, and he at once led us into the dining-room, where we found Dr Osborne, whom Selby had called in when the alarm of Edith's illness had been first given. Dr Osborne was a pale, under-sized, very young man. His face expressed considerable alarm. Vandeleur, however, managed to put him completely at his ease.

'I will have a chat with you in a few minutes, Dr Osborne, he said; 'but first I must get Mr Selby's report. Will you please tell me, sir, exactly what occurred?'

'Certainly,' he answered. 'We had a reception here last night, and my sister-in-law did not go to bed until early morning; she was in bad spirits, but otherwise in her usual health. My wife went into her room after she was in bed, and told me later on that she had found Edith in hysterics, and could not get her to explain anything. We both talked about taking her to the country without delay. Indeed, our intention was to get off this afternoon.'

'Well?' said Vandeleur.

'We had breakfast about half-past nine, and Miss Dallas came down, looking quite in her usual health, and in apparently good spirits. She ate with appetite, and, as it happened, she and my wife were both

helped from the same dish. The meal had nearly come to an end when she jumped up from the table, uttered a sharp cry, turned very pale, pressed her hand to her side, and ran out of the room. My wife immediately followed her. She came back again in a minute or two, and said that Edith was in violent pain, and begged of me to send for a doctor. Dr Osborne lives just round the corner. He came at once, but she died almost immediately after his arrival.'

'You were in the room?' asked Vandeleur, turning to Osborne. 'Yes,' he replied. 'She was conscious to the last moment, and died suddenly.'

'Did she tell you anything?'

'No, except to assure me that she had not eaten any food that day until she had come down to breakfast. After the death occurred I sent immediately to report the case, locked the door of the room where the poor girl's body is, and saw also that nobody touched anything on this table.'

Vandeleur rang the bell and a servant appeared. He gave quick orders. The entire remains of the meal were collected and taken charge of, and then he and the coroner's officer went upstairs.

When we were alone Selby sank into a chair. His face was quite drawn and haggard.

'It is the horrible suddenness of the thing which is so appalling,' he cried. 'As to Beatrice, I don't believe she will ever be the same again. She was deeply attached to Edith. Edith was nearly ten years her senior, and always acted the part of mother to her. This is a sad beginning to our life. I can scarcely think collectedly.'

I remained with him a little longer, and then, as Vandeleur did not

return, went back to my own house. There I could settle to nothing, and when Vandeleur rang me up on the telephone about six o'clock I hurried off to his rooms. As soon as I arrived I saw that Selby was with him, and the expression on both their faces told me the truth.

'This is a bad business,' said Vandeleur. 'Miss Dallas has died from swallowing poison. An exhaustive analysis and examination have been made, and a powerful poison, unknown to European toxicologists, has been found. This is strange enough, but how it has been administered is a puzzle. I confess, at the present moment, we are all nonplussed. It certainly was not in the remains of the breakfast, and we have her dying evidence that she took nothing else. Now, a poison with such appalling potency would take effect quickly. It is evident that she was quite well when she came to breakfast, and that the poison began to work towards the close of the meal. But how did she get it? This question, however, I shall deal with later on. The more immediate point is this. The situation is a serious one in view of the monetary issues and the value of the lady's life. From the aspects of the case, her undoubted sanity and her affection for her sister, we may almost exclude the idea of suicide. We must, therefore, call it murder. This harmless, innocent lady is struck down by the hand of an assassin, and with such devilish cunning that no trace or clue is left behind. For such an act there must have been some very powerful motive, and the person who designed and executed it must be a criminal of the highest order of scientific ability. Mr Selby has been telling me the exact financial position of the poor lady, and also of his own young wife. The absolute disappearance of the step-brother, in view of his previous character, is in the highest degree strange. Knowing, as we do, that between him and two million sterling there stood two lives--*one is taken!*'

A deadly sensation of cold seized me as Vandeleur uttered these last words. I glanced at Selby. His face was colourless and the pupils

of his eyes were contracted, as though he saw something which terrified him.

'What happened once may happen again,' continued Vandeleur. 'We are in the presence of a great mystery, and I counsel you, Mr Selby, to guard your wife with the utmost care.'

These words, falling from a man of Vandeleur's position and authority on such matters, were sufficiently shocking for me to hear, but for Selby to be given such a solemn warning about his young and beautiful and newly-married wife, who was all the world to him, was terrible indeed. He leant his head on his hands.

'Mercy on us!' he muttered. 'Is this a civilized country when death can walk abroad like this, invisible, not to be avoided? Tell me, Mr Vandeleur, what I must do.'

'You must be guided by me,' said Vandeleur, 'and, believe me, there is no witchcraft in the world. I shall place a detective in your household immediately. Don't be alarmed; he will come to you in plain clothes and will simply act as a servant. Nevertheless, nothing can be done to your wife without his knowledge. As to you, Druce,' he continued, turning to me, 'the police are doing all they can to find this man Silva, and I ask you to help them with your big agency, and to begin at once. Leave your friend to me. Wire instantly if you hear news.'

'You may rely on me,' I said, and a moment later I had left the room. As I walked rapidly down the street the thought of Madame Sara, her shop and its mysterious background, its surgical instruments, its operating-table, its induction coils, came back to me. And yet what could Madame Sara have to do with the present strange, inexplicable mystery?

The thought had scarcely crossed my mind before I heard a clatter alongside the kerb, and turning round I saw a smart open carriage, drawn by a pair of horses, standing there. I also heard my own name. I turned. Bending out of the carriage was Madame Sara.

'I saw you going by, Mr Druce. I have only just heard the news about poor Edith Dallas. I am terribly shocked and upset. I have been to the house, but they would not admit me. Have you heard what was the cause of her death?'

Madame's blue eyes filled with tears as she spoke.

'I am not at liberty to disclose what I have heard, Madame,' I answered, 'since I am officially connected with the affair.'

Her eyes narrowed. The brimming tears dried as though by magic. Her glance became scornful.

'Thank you,' she answered, 'your reply tells me that she did not die naturally. How very appalling! But I must not keep you. Can I drive you anywhere?'

'No, thank you.'

'Goodbye, then.'

She made a sign to the coachman, and as the carriage rolled away turned to look at me. Her face wore the defiant expression I had seen there more than once. Could she be connected with the affair? The thought came upon me with a violence that seemed almost conviction. Yet I had no reason for it--none.

To find Henry Joachim Silva was now my principal thought. My staff had instructions to make every possible inquiry, with large money

rewards as incitements. The collateral branches of other agencies throughout Brazil were communicated with by cable, and all the Scotland Yard channels were used. Still there was no result. The newspapers took up the case; there were paragraphs in most of them with regard to the missing step-brother and the mysterious death of Edith Dallas. Then someone got hold of the story of the will, and this was retailed with many additions for the benefit of the public. At the inquest the jury returned the following verdict:

'We find that Miss Edith Dallas died from taking poison of unknown name, but by whom or how administered there is no evidence to say.'

This unsatisfactory state of things was destined to change quite suddenly. On the 6th of August, as I was seated in my office, a note was brought me by a private messenger. It was as follows:

'Norfolk Hotel, Strand.

'Dear Sir--I have just arrived in London from Brazil, and have seen your advertisements. I was about to insert one myself in order to find the whereabouts of my sisters. I am a great invalid and unable to leave my room. Can you come to see me at the earliest possible moment?

Yours, Henry Joachim Silva.'

In uncontrollable excitement I hastily dispatched two telegrams, one to Selby and the other to Vandeleur, begging of them to be with me, without fail, as soon as possible. So the man had never been in England at all. The situation was more bewildering than ever. One thing, at least, was probable--Edith Dallas's death was not due to her step-brother. Soon after half-past six Selby arrived, and Vandeleur walked in ten minutes later. I told them what had occurred and showed them the letter. In half an hour's time we reached the hotel,

and on stating who I was we were shown into a room on the first floor by Silva's private servant. Resting in an armchair, as we entered, sat a man; his face was terribly thin. The eyes and cheeks were so sunken that the face had almost the appearance of a skull. He made no effort to rise when we entered, and glanced from one of us to the other with the utmost astonishment. I at once introduced myself and explained who we were. He then waved his hand for his man to retire.

'You have heard the news, of course, Mr Silva?' I said.

'News! What?' He glanced up to me and seemed to read something in my face. He started back in his chair.

'Good heavens,' he replied. 'Do you allude to my sisters? Tell me, quickly, are they alive?'

'Your elder sister died on the 29th of July, and there is every reason to believe that her death was caused by foul play.'

As I uttered these words the change that passed over his face was fearful to witness. He did not speak, but remained motionless. His claw-like hands clutched the arms of the chair, his eyes were fixed and staring, as though they would start from their hollow sockets, the colour of his skin was like clay. I heard Selby breathe quickly behind me, and Vandeleur stepped towards the man and laid his hand on his shoulder.

'Tell us what you know of this matter,' he said sharply.

Recovering himself with an effort, the invalid began in a tremulous voice: 'Listen closely, for you must act quickly. I am indirectly responsible for this fearful thing. My life has been a wild and wasted one, and now I am dying. The doctors tell me I cannot live a month, for I have a large aneurism of the heart. Eighteen months ago I was in

Rio. I was living fast and gambled heavily. Among my fellow-gamblers was a man much older than myself. His name was José Aranjo. He was, if anything, a greater gambler than I. One night we played alone. The stakes ran high until they reached a big figure. By daylight I had lost to him nearly £200,000. Though I am a rich man in point of income under my uncle's will, I could not pay a twentieth part of that sum. This man knew my financial position, and, in addition to a sum of £5,000 paid down, I gave him a document. I must have been mad to do so. The document was this--it was duly witnessed and attested by a lawyer--that, in the event of my surviving my two sisters and thus inheriting the whole of my uncle's vast wealth, half a million should go to José Aranjo. I felt I was breaking up at the time, and the chances of my inheriting the money were small. Immediately after the completion of the document this man left Rio, and I then heard a great deal about him that I had not previously known. He was a man of the queerest antecedents, partly Indian, partly Italian. He had spent many years of his life amongst the Indians. I heard also that he was as cruel as he was clever, and possessed some wonderful secrets of poisoning unknown to the West. I thought a great deal about this, for I knew that by signing that document I had placed the lives of my two sisters between him and a fortune. I came to Para six weeks ago, only to learn that one of my sisters was married and that both had gone to England. Ill as I was, I determined to follow them in order to warn them. I also wanted to arrange matters with you, Mr Selby.'

'One moment, sir,' I broke in, suddenly. 'Do you happen to be aware if this man, José Aranjo, knew a woman calling herself Madame Sara?'

'Knew her?' cried Silva. 'Very well indeed, and so, for that matter, did I. Aranjo and Madame Sara were the best friends, and constantly met. She called herself a professional beautifier--was very handsome, and had secrets for the pursuing of her trade unknown even to Aranjo.'

'Good heavens!' I cried, 'and the woman is now in London. She returned here with Mrs Selby and Miss Dallas. Edith was very much influenced by her, and was constantly with her. There is no doubt in my mind that she is guilty. I have suspected her for some time, but I could not find a motive. Now the motive appears. You surely can have her arrested?'

Vandeleur made no reply. He gave me a strange look, then he turned to Selby.

'Has your wife also consulted Madame Sara?' he asked, sharply.

'Yes, she went to her once about her teeth, but has not been to the shop since Edith's death. I begged of her not to see the woman, and she promised me faithfully she would not do so.'

'Has she any medicines or lotions given to her by Madame Sara--does she follow any line of treatment advised by her?'

'No, I am certain on that point.'

'Very well. I will see your wife tonight in order to ask her some questions. You must both leave town at once. Go to your country house and settle there. I am quite serious when I say that Mrs Selby is in the utmost possible danger until after the death of her brother. We must leave you now, Mr Silva. All business affairs must wait for the present. It is absolutely necessary that Mrs Selby should leave London at once. Good night, sir. I shall give myself the pleasure of calling on you tomorrow morning.'

We took leave of the sick man. As soon as we got into the street Vandeleur stopped.

'I must leave it to you, Selby,' he said, 'to judge how much of this

matter you tell to your wife. Were I you I would explain everything. The time for immediate action has arrived, and she is a brave and sensible woman. From this moment you must watch all the foods and liquids that she takes. She must never be out of your sight or out of the sight of some other trustworthy companion.'

'I shall, of course, watch my wife myself,' said Selby. 'But the thing is enough to drive one mad.'

'I will go with you to the country, Selby,' I said, suddenly.

'Ah!' cried Vandeleur, 'that is the best thing possible, and what I wanted to propose. Go, all of you, by an early train tomorrow.'

'Then I will be off home at once, to make arrangements,' I said. 'I will meet you, Selby, at Waterloo for the first train to Cronsmoor tomorrow.'

As I was turning away Vandeleur caught my arm.

'I am glad you are going with them,' he said. 'I shall write to you tonight re instructions. Never be without a loaded revolver. Good night.' By 6.15 the next morning Selby, his wife, and I were in a reserved, locked, first-class compartment, speeding rapidly west. The servants and Mrs Selby's own special maid were in a separate carriage. Selby's face showed signs of a sleepless night, and presented a striking contrast to the fair, fresh face of the girl round whom this strange battle raged. Her husband had told her everything, and, though still suffering terribly from the shock and grief of her sister's death, her face was calm and full of repose. A carriage was waiting for us at Cronsmoor, and by half-past nine we arrived at the old home of the Selbys, nestling amid its oaks and elms. Everything was done to make the home-coming of the bride as cheerful as circumstances would permit, but a gloom, impossible to lift,

overshadowed Selby himself. He could scarcely rouse himself to take the slightest interest in anything.

The following morning I received a letter from Vandeleur. It was very short, and once more impressed on me the necessity of caution. He said that two eminent physicians had examined Silva, and the verdict was that he could not live a month. Until his death precautions must be strictly observed.

The day was cloudless, and after breakfast I was just starting out for a stroll when the butler brought me a telegram. I tore it open; it was from Vandeleur,

'Prohibit all food until I arrive. Am coming down,' were the words. I hurried into the study and gave it to Selby. He read it and looked up at me.

'Find out the first train and go and meet him, old chap,' he said. 'Let us hope that this means an end of the hideous affair.'

I went into the hall and looked up the trains. The next arrived at Cronsmoor at 10.45. I then strolled round to the stables and ordered a carriage, after which I walked up and down on the drive. There was no doubt that something strange had happened. Vandeleur coming down so suddenly must mean a final clearing up of the mystery. I had just turned round at the lodge gates to wait for the carriage when the sound of wheels and of horses galloping struck on my ears. The gates were swung open, and Vandeleur in an open fly dashed through them. Before I could recover from my surprise he was out of the vehicle and at my side. He carried a small black bag in his hand.

'I came down by special train,' he said, speaking quickly. 'There is not a moment to lose. Come at once. Is Mrs Selby all right?'

'What do you mean?' I replied. 'Of course she is. Do you suppose that she is in danger?'

'Deadly,' was his answer. 'Come.'

We dashed up to the house together. Selby, who had heard our steps, came to meet us.

'Mr Vandeleur,' he cried. 'What is it? How did you come?'

'By special train, Mr Selby. And I want to see your wife at once. It will be necessary to perform a very trifling operation.'

'Operation!' he exclaimed. 'Yes; at once.'

We made our way through the hall and into the morning-room, where Mrs Selby was busily engaged reading and answering letters. She started up when she saw Vandeleur and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

'What has happened?' she asked. Vandeleur went up to her and took her hand.

'Do not be alarmed,' he said, 'for I have come to put all your fears to rest. Now, please, listen to me. When you visited Madame Sara with your sister, did you go for medical advice?'

The colour rushed into her face.

'One of my teeth ached,' she answered. 'I went to her about that. She is, as I suppose you know, a most wonderful dentist. She examined the tooth, found that it required stopping, and got an assistant, a Brazilian, I think, to do it.'

'And your tooth has been comfortable ever since?'

'Yes, quite. She had one of Edith's stopped at the same time.'

'Will you kindly sit down and show me which was the tooth into which the stopping was put?'

She did so.

'This was the one,' she said, pointing with her finger to one in the lower jaw. 'What do you mean? Is there anything wrong?'

Vandeleur examined the tooth long and carefully. There was a sudden rapid movement of his hand, and a sharp cry from Mrs Selby. With the deftness of long practice, and a powerful wrist, he had extracted the tooth with one wrench. The suddenness of the whole thing, startling as it was, was not so strange as his next movement.

'Send Mrs Selby's maid to her,' he said, turning to her husband; 'then come, both of you, into the next room.'

The maid was summoned. Poor Mrs Selby had sunk back in her chair, terrified and half fainting. A moment later Selby joined us in the dining-room.

'That's right,' said Vandeleur; 'close the door, will you?'

He opened his black bag and brought out several instruments. With one he removed the stopping from the tooth. It was quite soft and came away easily. Then from the bag he produced a small guinea-pig, which he requested me to hold. He pressed the sharp instrument into the tooth, and opening the mouth of the little animal placed the point on the tongue. The effect was instantaneous. The little head fell on to one of my hands--the guinea-pig was dead. Vandeleur was white as a sheet. He hurried up to Selby and wrung his hand.

'Thank heaven!' he said, 'I've been in time, but only just. Your wife is safe. This stopping would hardly have held another hour. I have been thinking all night over the mystery of your sister-in-law's death, and over every minute detail of evidence as to how the poison could have been administered. Suddenly the coincidence of both sisters having had their teeth stopped struck me as remarkable. Like a flash the solution came to me. The more I considered it the more I felt that I was right; but by what fiendish cunning such a scheme could have been conceived and executed is still beyond my power to explain. The poison is very like hyoscine, one of the worst toxic-alkaloids known, so violent in its deadly proportions that the amount that would go into a tooth would cause almost instant death. It has been kept in by a gutta-percha stopping, certain to come out within a month, probably earlier, and most probably during mastication of food. The person would die either immediately or after a very few minutes, and no one would connect a visit to the dentist with a death a month afterwards.'

What followed can be told in a very few words. Madame Sara was arrested on suspicion. She appeared before the magistrate, looking innocent and beautiful, and managed during her evidence completely to baffle that acute individual. She denied nothing, but declared that the poison must have been put into the tooth by one of the two Brazilians whom she had lately engaged to help her with her dentistry. She had her suspicions with regard to these men soon afterwards, and had dismissed them. She believed that they were in the pay of José Aranjo, but she could not tell anything for certain. Thus Madame escaped conviction. I was certain that she was guilty, but there was not a shadow of real proof. A month later Silva died, and Selby is now a double millionaire.

THE END

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Followed

L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace

I AM David Ross's wife. I was married to him a month ago. I have lived through the peril and escaped the danger. What I have lived through, how it happened, and why it happened, this story tells.

My maiden name was Flower Dalrymple. I spent my early days on the Continent, travelling about from place to place and learning much of Bohemian life and Bohemian ways. When I was eighteen years of age my father got an appointment in London. We went to live there--my father, my mother, two brothers, a sister, and myself. Before I was twenty I was engaged to David Ross. David was a landed proprietor. He had good means, and was in my eyes the finest fellow in the world. In appearance he was stalwart and broad-shouldered, with a complexion as dark as a gipsy. He had a passionate and almost wild look in his eyes, and his wooing of me was very determined, and I might almost say stormy.

When first he proposed for me I refused him from a curious and unaccountable sense of fear, but that night I was miserable, and when two days after he repeated his offer, I accepted him, for I discovered that, whatever his character, he was the man I could alone love in all the world.

He told me something of his history. His father had died when he was a baby, and he had spent all the intervening years, except when at school and the University, with his mother. His mother's name was Lady Sarah Ross. On her own mother's side she was of Spanish extraction, but she was the daughter of Earl Reighley. She was a great recluse, and David gave me to understand that her character

and ways of life were peculiar.

"You must be prepared for eccentricities in connection with my mother," he said. "I see her, perhaps, through rose-coloured spectacles, for she is to me the finest and the most interesting woman, with the exception of yourself, in the world. Her love for me is a very strange and a very deep passion. She has always opposed the idea of my marrying. Until I met you, I have yielded to her very marked wishes in this respect, I can do so no longer. All the same, I am almost afraid to tell her that we are engaged."

"Your account of your mother is rather alarming," I could not help saying. "Must I live with her after we are married, David?"

"Certainly not," he answered, with some abruptness. "You and I live at my place, Longmore; she goes to the Dower House."

"She will feel being deposed from her throne very acutely," I said.

"It will be our object in life, Flower, not to let her feel it," he answered. "I look forward with the deepest interest to your conquering her, to your winning her love. When you once win it, it is yours for ever."

All the time David was speaking I felt that he was hiding something. He was holding himself in check. With all his pluck and dash and daring, there was a weight on his mind, something which caused him, although he would not admit it, a curious sensation of uneasiness.

We had been engaged for a fortnight when he wrote to Lady Sarah apprising her of the fact. His letter received no answer. After a week, by his request, I wrote to her, but neither did she notice my letter.

At last, a month after our letters were written, I received a very cordial invitation from Lady Sarah. She invited me to spend Christmas with

David and herself at Longmore. She apologized for her apparent rudeness in not writing sooner, but said she had not been well. She would give me, she said, a very hearty welcome, and hoped I would visit the old place in the second week in December and remain over Christmas.

"You will have a quiet time," she wrote, "not dull, for you will be with David, but if you are accustomed to London and the ways of society, you must not expect to find them at Longmore."

Of course I accepted her invitation. Our wedding was to take place on the 10th of January. My trousseau was well under way, and I started for Longmore on a certain snowy afternoon, determined to enjoy myself and to like Lady Sarah in spite of her eccentricities.

Longmore was a rambling old place situated on the borders of Salisbury Plain. The house was built in the form of a cross. The roof was turreted, and there was a tower at one end. The new rooms were in a distant wing. The centre of the cross, forming the body of the house, was very old, dating back many hundreds of years.

David came to meet me at Salisbury. He drove a mail phaeton, and I clambered up to my seat by his side. A pair of thoroughbred black horses were harnessed to the carriage. David touched the arched neck of one of his favourites with his whip, and we flew through the air.

It was a moonlight night, and I looked at David once or twice. I had never regarded him as faultless, but I now saw something in his appearance which surprised me. It was arbitrary and haughty. He had a fierce way of speaking to the man who sat behind. I could guess that his temper was overbearing.

Never mind! No girl could care for David Ross a little. She must love

him with all her heart, and soul, and strength, or hate him. I cared for him all the more because of his faults. He was human, interesting, very tender when he chose, and he loved me with a great love.

We arrived at Longmore within an hour, and found Lady Sarah standing on the steps of the old house to welcome us. She was a tall and very stately woman, with black eyes and a swarthy complexion--a complexion unnaturally dark. Notwithstanding the grace of her appearance I noticed from the very first that there was something wild and uncanny about her. Her eyes were long and almond-shaped. Their usual expression was somewhat languid, but they had a habit of lighting up suddenly at the smallest provocation with a fierce and almost unholy fire. Her hair was abundant and white as snow, and her very black eyes, narrow-arched brows, and dark complexion were brought out into sharper contrast by this wealth of silvery hair.

She wore black velvet and some very fine Brussels lace, and as she came to meet me I saw the diamonds glittering on her fingers. Whatever her faults, few girls could desire a more picturesque mother -in-law.

Without uttering a word she held out both her hands and drew me into the great central hall. Then she turned me round and looked me all over in the firelight.

"Fair and petite," she said. "Blue eyes, lips indifferent red, rest of the features ordinary. An English girl by descent, by education, by appearance. Look me full in the face, Flower!"

I did what I was bid. She gazed from her superior height into my eyes. As my eyes met hers I was suddenly overpowered by the most extraordinary feeling which had ever visited me. All through my frame there ran a thrill of ghastly and overmastering fear. I shrank away from her, and I believe my face turned white. She drew me to her side

again, stooped, and kissed me. Then she said, abruptly:--

"Don't be nervous," --and then she turned to her son.

"You have had a cold drive," she said. "I hope you have not taken a chill?"

"Dear me, no, mother. Why should I?" he replied, somewhat testily. "Flower and I enjoyed our rush through the air."

He was rubbing his hands and warming himself by the log fire as he spoke --now he came to me and drew me towards its genial blaze. Lady Sarah glanced at us both. I saw her lips quiver and her black brows meet across her forehead. A very strange expression narrowed her eyes, a vindictive look, from which I turned away.

She swept, rather than walked, across the hall and rang a bell. A neatly dressed, pleasant-looking girl appeared.

"Take Miss Dalrymple to her room, Jessie, and attend on her," said Lady Sarah.

I was conducted up some low stairs and down a passage to a pretty, modern-looking room.

"Longmore is very old, miss," said Jessie, "and some of it is even tumbling to pieces, but Lady Sarah is never one for repairs. You won't find anything old, however, in this room, miss, for it has not been built more than ten years. You will have a lovely view of Salisbury Plain from here in the morning. I am glad, very glad, Miss Dalrymple, that you are not put into one of the rooms in the other wing."

I did not ask Jessie the meaning of her words. I thought she looked at me in an expressive way, but I would not meet her glance.

When I was ready Jessie conducted me to the drawing-room, where I found David standing on the rug in front of a log fire.

"Where is your mother?" I asked.

"She will be down presently. I say, what a pretty little girl it is," he cried, and he opened his big arms and folded me in a close embrace.

Just at that moment I heard the rustle of a silk dress, and, turning, saw Lady Sarah.

She wore a rich ruby gown, which rustled and glistened every time she moved. I tore myself from David's arms and faced her. There was a flush on my cheeks, and my eyes, I am sure, were suspiciously bright. She called me to her side and began to talk in a gentle and pleasant way.

Suddenly she broke off.

"Dinner is late," she said. "Ring the bell, David."

David's summons was answered by a black servant: a man with the most peculiar and, I must add, forbidding face I had ever seen.

"Is dinner served, Sambo?" inquired his mistress.

"It is on the table, missis." he replied, in excellent English.

Lady Sarah got up.

"David," she said, "will you take Flower to her place at the dinner-table?"

David led the way with me; Lady Sarah followed. David took the foot

of the table, his mother the head. I sat at Lady Sarah's left hand.

During the meal which followed she seemed to forget all about me. She talked incessantly, on matters relating to the estate, to her son. I perceived that she was a first-rate business woman, and I noticed that David listened to her with respect and interest. Her eyes never raised themselves to meet his without a softened and extraordinary expression filling them. It was a look of devouring and overmastering love. His eyes, as he looked into hers, had very much the same expression. Even at me he had never looked quite like this. It was as if two kindred souls, absolutely kindred in all particulars, were holding converse one with the other, and as if I, David's affianced wife, only held the post of interloper.

Sambo, the black servant, stood behind Lady Sarah's chair. He made a striking figure. He was dressed in the long, soft, full trousers which Easterns wear. I learnt afterwards that Sambo was an aborigine from Australia, but Lady Sarah had a fancy to dress him as though he hailed from the Far East. The colour of his silken garments was a rich deep yellow. His short jacket was much embroidered in silver, and he had a yellow turban twisted round his swarthy head.

His waiting was the perfection of the art. He attended to your slightest wants, and never made any sound as he glided about the apartment. I did not like him, however; I felt nearly as uncomfortable in his presence as I did in that of Lady Sarah.

We lingered for some little time when the meal was over; then Lady Sarah rose.

"Come, Flower," she said.

She took my hand in one of hers.

"You will join us, David, when you have had your smoke," she continued, and she laid her shapely hand across her son's broad forehead.

He smiled at her.

"All right, madre," he said, "I shall not be long."

His black eyes fell from his mother's face to mine, and he smiled at me-- a smile of such heart-whole devotion that my momentary depression vanished.

Lady Sarah took me into the drawing-room. There she made me seat myself in a low chair by her side, and began to talk.

"Has David never told you of my peculiar tastes, my peculiar recreations?"

"No," I replied; "all he has really told me about you, his mother, is that you love him with a very great love, and that he feared our marriage would pain you."

"Tut!" she replied. "Do you imagine that a little creature like you can put a woman like me out? But we won't talk personal things tonight. I want you to see the great charm of my present life. You must know that I have for several years eschewed society. David has mingled with his kind, but I have stayed at home with my faithful servant Sambo and--my pets."

"Your pets!" I said; "dogs, horses?"

"Neither."

"Cats then, and perhaps birds?"

"I detest cats, and always poison any stray animals of that breed that come to Longmore. It is true I keep a few pigeons, but they are for a special use. I also keep rabbits for the same purpose."

"Then what kind of pets have you?" I asked.

"Reptiles," she said, shortly. "Would you like to see them?"

I longed to say to Lady Sarah that nothing would induce me to look at her horrible pets, but I was afraid. She gazed full at me, and I nodded my head. Her face was white, and her lips had taken on once more that hard, straight line which terrified me.

She rose from her seat, took my hand, and led me across the drawing- room into the hall. We crossed the hall to the left. Here she opened a baize door and motioned to me to follow her. We went down some stairs-- they were narrow and winding. At the bottom of the stairs was a door. Lady Sarah took a key from her pocket, fitted it into the lock, and opened the door.

A blast of wintry air blew on my face, and some scattered, newly-fallen snow wetted my feet.

"I forgot about the snow," she said. "The reptile-house is only just across the yard. It is warm there , but if you are afraid of wetting your feet, say so."

"I am not afraid," I replied.

"That is good. Then come with me."

She held up her ruby-coloured silk dress, and I caught a glimpse of her neat ankles and shapely feet.

At the other side of the stone yard was a building standing by itself

and completely surrounded with a high fence of closely meshed wire netting. Lady Sarah opened a door in the fence with another key, then she locked it carefully behind her. With a third key she unfastened the door of the building itself. When she opened this door the air from within, hot and moist, struck on my face.

She pushed me in before her, and I stood just within the entrance while she lit a lantern. As the candle caught the flame I uttered a sudden cry, for against my arm, with only the glass between, I saw a huge mottled snake, which, startled by the sudden light, was coiling to and fro. Its black forked tongue flickered about its lips as if it were angry at being disturbed in its slumbers.

I drew back from the glass quickly, and caught Lady Sarah's eyes fixed upon me with a strange smile.

"My pets are here," she said, "and this is one. I was a great traveller in my youth, as was my father before me. After my husband died I again went abroad. When David's education was finished he went with me. I inherit my father's taste for snakes and reptiles. I have lived for my pets for many long years now, and I fancy I possess the most superb private collection in the kingdom. Look for yourself, Flower. This is the Vipera Nascicornis, or in our English language the African nose-horned snake. Pray notice his flat head. He is a fine specimen, just nine feet long. I caught him myself on the Gold Coast, with my friend Jane Ashley."

"Is he--venomous?" I asked. My lips trembled so that I could scarcely get out the words.

"Four hours for a man," was the laconic reply. "We count the degree of poison of a snake by the time a man lives after he is bitten. This fellow is, therefore, comparatively harmless. But see, here is the Pseudechis Porphyriacus-- the black snake of Tasmania and

Australia. His time is six minutes. Wake up, Darkey!" and she tapped the glass with her knuckles.

An enormous glistening coil, polished as ebony, moved, reared its head, and disappeared into the shadow of the wall.

I gave a visible shudder. Lady Sarah took no notice. She walked slowly between the cases, explaining various attributes and particulars with regard to her favourites.

"Here are puff adders," she said; "here are ring snakes; in this cage are whip snakes. Ah! here is the dreaded moccasin from Florida--here are black vipers from the South African mountains and copper-heads from the Peruvian swamps. I have a pet name for each," she continued; "they are as my younger children."

As she said the words it flashed across my mind, for the first time, that, perhaps, Lady Sarah was not in her right senses. The next instant her calm and dignified voice dispelled my suspicions.

"I have shown you my treasures," she said; "I hope you think it a great honour. My father, the late Lord Reighley, had a passion for reptiles almost equal to my own. The one thing I regret about David is that he has not inherited it."

"But are you not afraid to keep your collection here?" I asked. "Do you not dread some of them escaping?"

"I take precautions,"' she said, shortly; "and as to any personal fear, I do not know the meaning of the word. My favourites know me, and after their fashion they love me."

As she spoke she slid back one of the iron doors and, reaching in her hand, took out a huge snake and deliberately whipped the

creature round her neck.

"This is my dear old carpet snake," she said; "quite harmless. You can come close to him and touch him, if you like."

"No, thank you," I replied.

She put the snake back again and locked the door.

We returned to the drawing-room. I went and stood by the fire. I was trembling all over, but not altogether from the coldness of the atmosphere.

"You are nervous," said Lady Sarah. "I thought you brave a few minutes ago. The sight of my beauties has shocked you. Will you oblige me by not telling David to-night that I showed them to you?"

I bowed my head, and just at that moment David himself entered the room.

He went to the piano, and almost without prelude began to sing. He had a magnificent voice, like a great organ. Lady Sarah joined him. He and she sang together, the wildest, weirdest, most extraordinary songs I had ever listened to. They were mostly Spanish. Suddenly Lady Sarah took out her guitar and began to play--David accompanying her on the piano.

The music lasted for about an hour. Then Lady Sarah shut the piano.

"The little white English girl is very tired," she said. "Flower, you must go to bed immediately. Good-night."

When I reached my room I found Jessie waiting to attend on me. She asked me at once if I had seen the reptiles.

"Yes," I said.

"And aren't you nearly dead with terror of them, miss?"

"I am a little afraid of them," I said. "Is there any fear of their escaping?"

"Law, no, miss! Who would stay in the house if there were? You need not be frightened. But this is a queer house, very queer, all the same."

The next day after breakfast David asked me if I had seen his mother's pets.

"I have," I replied, "but she asked me not to mention the fact to you last night. David, I am afraid of them. Must they stay here when I come to live at Longmore?"

"The madre goes, and her darlings with her," he answered, and he gave a sigh, and a shadow crossed his face.

"You are sorry to part with your mother?" I said.

"I shall miss her," he replied. "Even you, Flower, cannot take the place my mother occupies in my heart. But I shall see her daily, and you are worth sacrificing something for, my little white English blossom."

"Why do you speak of me as if I were so essentially English?" I said.

"You look the part. You are very much like a flower of the field. Your pretty name, and your pretty ways, and your fair complexion foster the idea. Mother admires you; she thinks you very sweet to look at. Now come into the morning-room and talk to her."

That day, after lunch, it rained heavily. We were all in the morning -

room, a somewhat dismal apartment, when David turned to his mother.

"By the way, madre," he said, "I want to have the jewels re-set for Flower."

"What do you say?" inquired his mother.

"I mean to have the diamonds and the other jewels re-set for my wife," he replied, slowly.

"I don't think it matters," said Lady Sarah.

"Matters!" cried David; "I don't understand you. Flower must have the jewels made up to suit her petite appearance. I should like her to see them. Will you give me the key of the safe and I will bring them into this room?"

"You can show them, of course," said Lady Sarah. She spoke in a careless tone.

He looked at her, shrugged his shoulders, and I was surprised to see an angry light leap into his eyes. He took the key without a word and left the room.

I sat down on the nearest window-ledge-- a small, slight, very fair girl. No one could feel more uncomfortable and out of place.

David returned with several morocco cases. He put them on the table, then he opened them one by one. The treasures within were magnificent. There were necklets and bracelets and rings and tiaras innumerable. David fingered them, and Lady Sarah stood close by.

"This tiara is too heavy for you, Flower," said David, suddenly.

As he spoke, he picked up a magnificent circlet of flashing diamonds and laid them against my golden head. The next moment the ornament was rudely snatched away by Lady Sarah. She walked to a glass which stood between two windows and fitted the tiara over her own head.

"Too heavy for Flower, and it suits you, mother," said the young man, his eyes flashing with a sudden genuine admiration.

She laid the tiara on the table.

"Leave the things as they are for the present," she said. "It is not necessary to have them altered. You are marrying a flower, remember, and flowers of the field do not need this sort of adornment."

She tried to speak quietly, but her lips trembled and her words came in jerks.

"And I don't want to wear them," I cried. "I don't like them."

"That is speaking in a very childish way," said Lady Sarah.

"You must wear them when you are presented, dear," remarked David. "But there is time enough; I will put the things away for the present."

The jewels were returned to the safe, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

That night I was tired out and slept well, and as the next morning was a glorious one, more like spring than mid-winter, David proposed that he and I should spend the day driving about Salisbury Plain and seeing the celebrated stones.

He went to the stables to order the dog-cart to be got ready, and I ran

up to my room to put on my hat and warm jacket.

When I came back to the hall my future mother-in-law was standing there. Her face was calm and her expression mild and genial. She kissed me almost affectionately, and I went off with David in high spirits, my fears lulled to slumber.

He knew every inch of the famous Stonehenge, and told me many of the legends about its origin. There was one stone in particular which we spent some time in observing. It was inside the circle, a flat, broad stone, with a depression in the middle.

"This," said David, "is called the 'Slaughter Stone.' On this stone the Druids killed their victims."

"How interesting and how horrible!" I cried.

"It is true," he answered. "These stones, dating back into the ages of the past, have always had a queer fascination for me. I love them almost as much as my mother does. She often comes here when her nerves are not at their best and wanders about this magic circle for hours."

David told me many other legends. We lunched and had tea in the small town of Wilton, and did not return home until time for late dinner.

I went to my room, and saw nothing of Lady Sarah until I entered the drawing-room. I there found David and his mother in earnest conversation. His face looked full of annoyance.

"I am sorry," said Lady Sarah; "I am afraid, Flower, you will have to make up your mind to having a dull day alone with me to-morrow."

"But why dull?" interrupted David. "Flower will enjoy a day by herself

with you, mother. She wants to know you, she wants to love you, as I trust you will soon love her."

Lady Sarah made no answer. After a pause, during which an expression of annoyance and displeasure visited her thin lips, she said:--

"An urgent telegram has arrived from our lawyers for David. He must go to town by the first train in the morning."

"I will come back to-morrow night, little girl," he said.

He patted me on my hand as he spoke, and I did not attempt to raise any objection. A moment later we went into the dining-room.

During the meal I was much disturbed by the persistent way in which Sambo watched me. Without exception, Sambo had the ugliest face I had ever seen. His eyes were far apart, and wildly staring out of his head. His features were twisted, he had very thick lips, and the whole of the lower part of his face was in undue prominence. But, ugly as he was in feature, there was a certain dignity about him. His very upright carriage, his very graceful movements, his very picturesque dress, could not but impress me, although, perhaps, in a measure they added to the uneasiness with which I regarded him. I tried to avoid his gaze, but whenever I raised my eyes I encountered his, and, in consequence, I had very little appetite for dinner.

The evening passed quickly, and again that night I slept well. When I awoke it was broad daylight, and Jessie was pouring hot water into a bath for me.

"Mr. Ross went off more than two hours ago, miss," she said. "He left a message that I was to be very attentive to you, so if you want anything I hope you will ask me."

"Certainly I will," I replied. Jessie was a pretty girl, with a rosy face and bright, pleasant eyes. I saw her fix these eyes now upon my face--she came close to me.

"I am very glad you are going to marry Mr. Ross," she said, "and I am very glad that you will be mistress here, for if there was not to be a change soon, I could not stay."

"What do you mean?" I said.

She shrugged her shoulders significantly.

"This is a queer house," she said--"there are queer people in it, and there are queer things done in it--there are the reptiles!"

I gave an involuntary shiver.

"There are the reptiles," she repeated. "Lady Sarah and Sambo play tricks with them at times. Sambo has got a stuff that drives them nearly mad. When Lady Sarah is at her wildest he uses it. I have watched them when they didn't know I was looking: half--a--dozen of the snakes following Sambo as if they were demented, and Lady Sarah looking on and laughing! He puts the thing on his boots. I do not know what it is. They never hurt him. He flings the boots at them and they are quiet. Yes, it is a queer house, and I am afraid of the reptiles. By the way, miss, would you not like me to clean your boots for you?"

"Why so?" I asked. My face had turned white and my teeth were chattering. Her words unnerved me considerably.

"I will, if you like," she said. "Sambo sha'n't have them. Now, miss, I think you have everything you want."

She left me, and I dressed as quickly as I could. As I did so my eyes fell upon a little pair of brown boots, for which I had a special affection. They were polished up brightly; no boots could be more beautifully cleaned. What did Jessie mean? What did she mean, too, by speaking of Lady Sarah's wild fits?

I went downstairs, to find Lady Sarah in a genial humour. She was smiling and quite agreeable. Sambo did not wait at breakfast, and in consequence we had a pleasant meal. When it was over she took my hand and led me into her morning-room.

"Come here," she said, "I want to speak to you. So you are David's choice! Now listen. The aim and object of my life ever since I lost my husband has been to keep David single."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What I say. I love my son with a passion which you, you little white creature, cannot comprehend. I want him for myself entirely. You have dared to step in--you have dared to take him from me. But listen: even if you do marry him, you won't keep him long. You would like to know why --I will tell you. Because his love for you is only the passion which a man may experience for a pair of blue eye , and a white skin, and childish figure. It is as water unto wine compared to the love he feels for me. He will soon return to me. Be warned in time. Give him up."

"I cannot," I said.

"You won't be happy here. The life is not your life. The man is not the right sort of man for you. In some ways he is half a savage. He has been much in wild countries, in lands uninhabited by civilized people. He is not the man for you, nor am I the mother-in-law for you. Give him up. Here is paper and here is a pen. Write him a letter. Write it now,

and the carriage shall be at the door and you will be taken to Wilton--from there you can get a train to London, and you will be safe, little girl, quite safe."

"You ask the impossible," I replied; "I love your son."

She had spoken with earnestness, the colour flaming into her cheeks, her eyes very bright. Now her face grew cold and almost leaden in hue.

"I have given you your choice and a way of escape," she said. "If you don't take the offer, it is not my fault." She walked out of the room.

What did she mean? I stayed where she had left me. I was trembling all over. Terrors of the most overmastering and unreasoning sort visited me. All I had lived through since I came to Longmore now flooded my imagination and made me weak with nervous fears. The reptile-house-- Lady Sarah-- Sambo's strange behaviour--Sambo's wicked glance-- Jessie's words. Oh, why had I come? Why had David left me alone in this terrible place?

I got up, left the room, and strode into the grounds. The grounds were beautiful, but I could find no pleasure in them. Over and over the desire to run away visited me. I only restrained my nervous longing for David's sake. He would never forgive me if I left Longmore because I feared his mother.

The gong sounded for lunch, and I went into the house. Lady Sarah was seated at the table; Sambo was absent.

"I have had a busy morning," she said. "Darkey is ill."

"Darkey!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, the black snake whose bite kills in six minutes. Sambo is with him; he and I have been giving him some medicine. I trust he will be better soon. He is my favourite reptile--a magnificent creature."

I made no remark.

"I am afraid you must amuse yourself as best you can this afternoon," she continued, "for Sambo and I will be engaged with the snake. I am sorry I cannot offer to send you for a drive, but two of the horses are out and the bay mare is lame."

I said I would amuse myself, and that I should not require the use of any of the horses, and she left me.

I did not trouble to go on the Plain. I resumed my restless wanderings about the place. I wondered, as I did so, if Longmore could ever be a real home to me. As the moments flew past I looked at my watch, counting the hours to David's return. When he was back, surely the intangible danger which I could not but feel surrounded me would be over.

At four o'clock Sambo brought tea for one into the drawing-room. He laid it down, with a peculiar expression.

"You will be sorry to hear, missie," he said, "that Missah Ross not coming back to-night." The man spoke in a queer kind of broken English.

I sprang to my feet, my heart beating violently.

"Sorry, missie, business keep him--telegram to missis; not coming back till morning. Yah, missie, why you stay?"

"What do you mean?"I asked.

The man had a hazel wand in his hand. I had noticed it without curiosity up to the present. Now he took it and pointed it at me. As he did so he uttered the curious word "Ullinka." The evil glitter in his eyes frightened me so much that I shrank up against the wall.

"What are you doing that for?" I cried. He snapped the stick in two and flung it behind him.

"Missie, you take Sambo's word and go right away to-night. Missis no well--Darkey no well-- Sambo no well. No place for missie with blue eyes and fair hair. I say 'Ullinka,' and 'Ullinka' means dead--this fellah magic stick. Missie run to Wilton, take train from Wilton to London. Short track 'cross Plain-- missie go quick. Old Sambo open wicket-gate and let her go. Missie go soon."

"Do you mean it?" I said.

"Vswt--yes."

"I will go," I said. "You terrify me. Can I have a carriage?"

"No time, missie. Old missis find out. Old missis no wish it--missie go quick 'cross Plain short track to Wilton. Moon come up short time."

"I will go," I whispered.

"Missie take tea first and then get ready," he continued. "Sambo wait till missie come downstairs."

I did not want the tea, but the man brought me a cup ready poured out.

"One cup strengthen missie, then short track 'cross Plain straight

ahead to Wilton. Moon in sky. Missie safe then from old missis, from Darkey, and from Sambo."

I drank the tea, but did not touch the cake and bread and butter. I went to my room, fear at my heels. In my terror I forgot to remark, although I remembered it well afterwards, that for some extraordinary reason most of my boots and shoes had disappeared. My little favourite pair of brown boots alone was waiting for me. I put them on, buttoned them quickly, put on my fur coat and cap, and with my purse in my pocket ran downstairs. No matter what David thought of me now. There was something terrible in this house--an unknown and indescribable fear--I must get away from Longmore at any cost.

Sambo conducted me without a word down the garden and out on to the Plain through the wicket-gate.

"Quick, missie," he said, and then he vanished from view, shutting and locking the gate behind him.

It was a perfect evening, still and cold. The sun was near the horizon and would soon set, and a full moon was just rising. I determined to walk briskly. I was strong and active, and the distance between Longmore and Wilton did not frighten me. I could cross the Plain direct from Longmore, and within two hours at longest would reach Wilton. My walk would lead past Stonehenge.

The Plain looked weird in the moonlight. It looked unfathomable: it seemed to stretch into space as if it knew no ending. Walking fast, running at intervals, pausing now and then to take breath, I continued my fearful journey.

Was Lady Sarah mad, was Sambo mad, and what ailed Darkey, the awful black snake whose bite caused death in six minutes? As the thought of Darkey came to me, making my heart throb until I thought it

would stop, I felt a strange and unknown sensation of fatigue creeping over me: my feet began to lag. I could not account for this. I took out my watch and looked at it. I felt so tired that to go on without a short rest was impossible. There was a stone near. I sat on it for a moment or two. While resting I tried to collect my scattered thoughts. I wondered what sort of story I should tell David: how I would appease his anger and satisfy him that I did right in flying like a runaway from the home which was soon to be my own. As these thoughts came to me I closed my eyes; I felt my head nodding. Then all was lost in unconsciousness.

I awoke after what seemed a moment's sleep to find that I had been sitting on the stone for over half an hour. I felt refreshed by my slumber, and started now to continue my walk rapidly. I went lightly over the springy turf. I knew my bearings well, for David had explained everything to me on our long expedition yesterday.

I must have gone over a mile right on to the bare Plain when I began once again to experience that queer and unaccountable sensation of weakness. My pace slowed down and I longed again to rest. I resolved to resist the sensation and continued my way, but more slowly now and with a heavily beating heart. My heart laboured in a most unnatural way. I could not account for my own sensations.

Suddenly I paused and looked back. I fancied that I heard a noise, very slight and faint and different from that which the wind made as it sighed over the vast, billowy undulations of the Plain. Now, as I looked back, I saw something about fifty yards away, something which moved swiftly over the short grass. Whatever the thing was, it came towards me, and as it came it glistened now and then in the moonlight. What could it be? I raised my hand to shade my eyes from the bright light of the moon. I wondered if I was the subject of an hallucination. But, no; whatever that was which was now approaching

me, it was a reality, no dream. It was making straight in my direction. The next instant every fibre in my body was tingling with terror, for gliding towards me, in great curves, with head raised, was an enormous black snake!

For one moment I gazed, in sickened horror, and then I ran--ran as one runs in a nightmare, with thumping heart and clogged feet and knees that were turned to water. There could be no doubt of what had happened: the great black snake, Darkey, had escaped from Longmore and was following me. Why had it escaped? How had it escaped? Was its escape premeditated? Was it meant to follow me? Was I the victim of a pre-arranged and ghastly death? Was it--was it?--my head reeled, my knees tottered. There was not a tree or a house in sight. The bare, open Plain surrounded me for miles. As I reeled, however, to the crest of the rise I saw, lying in the moonlight, not a quarter of a mile away, the broken ring of Stonehenge: I reached it in time to clamber on to one of the stones. I might be saved. It was my only chance.

Summoning all my energies I made for the ruined temple. For the first hundred yards I felt that I was gaining on the brute, though I could hear, close on my track, its low, continuous hiss. Then the deadly faintness for which I could not account once more seized me. I fancied I heard someone calling me in a dim voice, which sounded miles away.

Making a last frantic effort, I plunged into the circle of stones and madly clambered on to the great "Slaughter Stone." Once more there came a cry, a figure flashed past me, a loud report rang in my ears, and a great darkness came over me.

"Drink this, Flower."

I was lying on my back. Lady Sarah was bending over me. The

moonlight was shining, and it dazzled my eyes when I first opened them. In the moonlight I could see that Lady Sarah's face was very white. There was a peculiar expression about it. She put her hand gently and deftly under my head, and held something to my lips. I drank a hot and fiery mixture, and was revived.

"Where am I--what has happened?" I asked.

"You are on the great ' Slaughter Stone' on Salisbury Plain. You have had a narrow escape. Don't speak. I am going to take you home."

"Not back to Longmore?"

"Yes, back to Longmore, your future home. Don't be silly."

"But the snake, Darkey, the black snake?" I said. I cowered, and pressed my hand to my face. "He followed me, he followed me," I whispered.

"He is dead," she answered; "I shot him with my own hands. You have nothing to fear from me or from Darkey any more. Come!"

I was too weak to resist her. She did not look unkind. There was no madness in her eyes. At that moment Sambo appeared in view. Sambo lifted me from the stone and carried me to a dog-cart which stood on the Plain. Lady Sarah seated herself by my side, took the reins, and we drove swiftly away.

Once again we entered the house. Lady Sarah took me to the morning- room. She shut the door, but did not lock it. There was a basin of hot soup on the table.

"Drink, and be quick," she said, in an imperious voice.

I obeyed her; I was afraid to do otherwise.

"Better?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied, in a semi-whisper.

"Then listen."

I tried to rise, but she motioned me to stay seated.

"The peril is past," she said. "You have lived through it. You are a plucky girl, and I respect you. Now hear what I have to say."

I tried to do so and to keep down my trembling. She fixed her eyes on me and she spoke.

"Long ago I made a vow," she said. "I solemnly vowed before Almighty God that as long as I lived I would never allow my only son to marry. He knew that I had made this vow, and for a long time he respected it, but he met you and became engaged to you in defiance of his mother's vow and his mother's wish. When I heard the tidings, I lost my senses. I became wild with jealousy, rage, and real madness. I would not write to you nor would I write to him."

"Why did you write at last--why did you ask me here?" I said then.

"Because the jealousy passed, as it always does, and for a time I was sane."

"Sane!" I cried.

"Yes, little girl; yes, sane! But listen. Some years ago, when on the coast of Guinea, I was the victim of a very severe sunstroke. From that time I have had fits of madness. Any shock, any excitement, brings them on.

"I had such a fit of madness when my son wrote to say that he was engaged to you. It passed, and I was myself again. You were not in the house an hour, however, before I felt it returning. There is only one person who can manage me at these times; there is only one person whom I fear and respect--my black servant Sambo. Sambo manages me, and yet at the same time I manage him. He loves me after his blind and heathen fashion. He has no fear; he has no conscience; to commit a crime is nothing to him. He loves me, and he passionately loves the reptiles. To please me and to carry out my wishes are the sole objects of his life.

"With madness in my veins I watched you and David during the last two days, and the wild desire to crush you to the very earth came over me. David went to London, and I thought the opportunity had come. I spoke to Sambo about it, and Sambo made a suggestion. I listened to him. My brain was on fire. I agreed to do what he suggested. My snake Darkey was to be the weapon to take your life. I felt neither remorse nor pity. Sambo is a black from Australia, an aborigine from that distant country. He knows the secrets of the blacks. There is a certain substance extracted from a herb which the blacks know, and which, when applied to any part of the dress or the person of an enemy, will induce each snake which comes across his path to turn and follow him. The substance drives the snake mad, and he will follow and kill his victim. Sambo possessed the stuff, and from time to time, to amuse me, he has tried its power on my reptiles. He has put it on his own boots, but he himself has never been bitten, for he has flung the boots to the snakes at the last moment. This afternoon he put it on the brown boots which you are now wearing. He then terrified you, and induced you to run away across Salisbury Plain. He put something into your tea to deprive you of strength, and when you were absent about three-quarters of an hour he let Darkey loose. Darkey followed you as a needle will follow a magnet. Sambo called me to the wicket-gate and showed me the glistening creature gliding

over the Plain in your direction. As I looked, a veil fell from my eyes. The madness left me, and I became sane. I saw the awful thing that I had done. I repented with agony. In a flash I ordered the dog-cart, and with Sambo by my side I followed you. I was just in time. I shot my favourite reptile. You were saved."

Lady Sarah wiped the drops of perspiration from her forehead.

"You are quite safe," she said, after a pause, "and I am sane. What I did, I did when I was not accountable. Are you going to tell David?"

"How can I keep it from him?"

"It seems hard to you now, but I ask you to do it. I promise not to oppose your marriage. I go meekly to the Dower House. I am tired of the reptiles--my favourite is dead, and the others are nothing to me. They shall be sent as a gift to the Zoological Gardens. Now will you tell David? If you do, I shall shoot myself to-night. Think for an hour, then tell me your decision." She left the room.

How I endured that hour I do not know! At the end of it I went to seek her. She was pacing up and down the great hall. I ran to her. I tried to take her hand, but she held her hands behind her.

"He will love you, he will worship you, and I, his old mother, will be nothing to him. What are you going to do?" she said then.

"I will never tell him," I whispered.

She looked hard at me, and her great black eyes softened.

"You are worthy to be his wife," she said, in a hoarse voice, and she left me.

I am David's wife, and David does not know. He will never know. We

are still on our honeymoon, but David is in trouble, for by the very last post news reached him of Lady Sarah's sudden death. He was absent from her when she breathed her last. He shall never know the worst. He shall always treasure her memory in his heart.

THE END