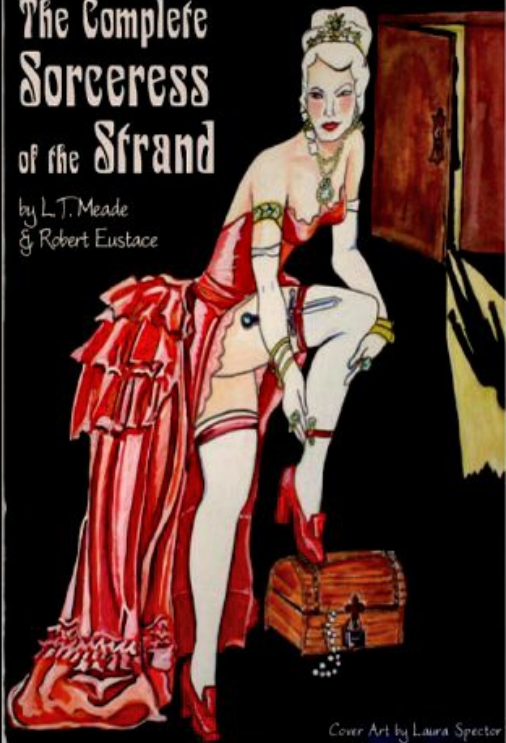


The Complete Sorceress of the Strand

by L.T. Meade
& Robert Eustace



Cover Art by Laura Spector

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Story I.--Madame Sara

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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 recognized 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

the 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 sha'n'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 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 Farrington'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 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 over-powering 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 eyes. 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 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 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 non-plussed. 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 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."

"Good-bye, then."

She made a sign to the coachman, and as the carriage rolled away turned to look back 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. Advertisements were widely circulated. 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 ran 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 probably--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 arm-chair, 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 not 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 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 Arango. 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 Arango. 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

antedecents, 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 Arango, knew a woman calling herself Madame Sara?"

"Knew her?" cried Silva. "Very well indeed, and so, for that matter, did I. Arango 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 Arango."

"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. Goodnight."

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-nine we arrived at the old home of the Selbys, nestling amid its oaks and elms. Everything was done to make the homecoming 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 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 Crons Moor 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 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 Arango, 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.

(End of Part One.)

II.--THE BLOOD-RED CROSS

The Sorceress of the Strand.

BY L.T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

II.--THE BLOOD-RED CROSS.

from the Strand magazine (1902-nov.)

IN the month of November in the year 1899 I found myself a guest in the house of one of my oldest friends--George Rowland. His beautiful place in Yorkshire was an ideal holiday resort. It went by the name of Rowland's Folly, and had been built on the site of a former dwelling in the reign of the first George. The house was now replete with every modern luxury. It, however, very nearly cost its first owner, if not the whole of his fortune, yet the most precious heirloom of the family. This was a pearl necklace of almost fabulous value. It had been secured as booty by a certain Geoffrey Rowland at the time of the Battle of Agincourt, had originally been the property of one of the Dukes of Genoa, and had even for a short time been in the keeping of the Pope. From the moment that Geoffrey Rowland took possession of the necklace there had been several attempts made to deprive him of it. Sword, fire, water, poison, had all been used, but ineffectually. The necklace with its eighty pearls, smooth, symmetrical, pear-shaped, of a translucent white colour and with a subdued iridescent sheen, was still in the possession of the family, and was likely to remain there, as George Rowland told me, until the end of time. Each bride wore the necklace on her wedding-day, after which it was put into the strong-room and, as a rule, never seen again until the next

bridal occasion. The pearls were roughly estimated as worth from two to three thousand pounds each, but the historical value of the necklace put the price almost beyond the dreams of avarice.

It was reported that in the autumn of that same year an American millionaire had offered to buy it from the family at their own price, but as no terms would be listened to the negotiations fell through.

George Rowland belonged to the oldest and proudest family in the West Riding, and no man looked a better gentleman or more fit to uphold ancient dignities than he. He was proud to boast that from the earliest days no stain of dishonour had touched his house, that the women of the family were as good as the men, their blood pure, their morals irreproachable, their ideas lofty.

I went to Rowland's Folly in November, and found a pleasant, hospitable, and cheerful hostess in Lady Kennedy, Rowland's only sister. Antonia Ripley was, however, the centre of all interest. Rowland was engaged to Antonia, and the history was romantic. Lady Kennedy told me all about it.

"She is a penniless girl without family," remarked the good woman, somewhat snappishly. "I can't imagine what George was thinking of."

"How did your brother meet her?" I asked.

"We were both in Italy last autumn; we were staying in Naples, at the Vesuve. An English lady was staying there of the name of Studley. She died while we were at the hotel. She had under her charge a young girl, the same Antonia who is now engaged to my brother. Before her death she begged of us to befriend her, saying that the child was without money and without friends. All Mrs. Studley's money died with her. We promised, not being able to do otherwise. George fell in love almost at first sight. Little Antonia was provided for by

becoming engaged to my brother. I have nothing to say against the girl, but I dislike this sort of match very much. Besides, she is more foreign than English."

"Cannot Miss Ripley tell you anything about her history?"

"Nothing, except that Mrs. Studley adopted her when she was a tiny child. She says, also, that she has a dim recollection of a large building crowded with people, and a man who stretched out his arms to her and was taken forcibly away. That is all. She is quite a nice child, and amiable, with touching ways and a pathetic face; but no one knows what her ancestry was. Ah, there you are, Antonia! What is the matter now?"

The girl tripped across the room. She was like a young fawn; of a smooth, olive complexion--dark of eye and mysteriously beautiful, with the graceful step which is seldom granted to an English girl.

"My lace dress has come," she said. "Markham is unpacking it--but the bodice is made with a low neck."

Lady Kennedy frowned.

"You are too absurd, Antonia," she said. "Why won't you dress like other girls? I assure you that peculiarity of yours of always wearing your dress high in the evening annoys George."

"Does it?" she answered, and she stepped back and put her hand to her neck just below the throat--a constant habit of hers, as I afterwards had occasion to observe.

"It disturbs him very much," said Lady Kennedy. "He spoke to me about it only yesterday. Please understand, Antonia, that at the ball you cannot possibly wear a dress high to your throat. It cannot be

permitted."

"I shall be properly dressed on the night of the ball," replied the girl.

Her face grew crimson, then deadly pale.

"It only wants a fortnight to that time, but I shall be ready."

There was a solemnity about her words. She turned and left the room.

"Antonia is a very trying character," said Lady Kennedy. "Why won't she act like other girls? She makes such a fuss about wearing a proper evening dress that she tries my patience--but she is all crotchets."

"A sweet little girl for all that," was my answer.

"Yes; men like her."

Soon afterwards, as I was strolling, on the terrace, I met Miss Ripley. She was sitting in a low chair. I noticed how small, and slim, and young she looked, and how pathetic was the expression of her little face. When she saw me she seemed to hesitate; then she came to my side.

"May I walk with you, Mr. Druce?" she asked.

"I am quite at your service," I answered. "Where shall we go?"

"It doesn't matter. I want to know if you will help me."

"Certainly, if I can, Miss Ripley."

"It is most important. I want to go to London."

"Surely that is not very difficult?"

"They won't allow me to go alone, and they are both very busy. I have just sent a telegram to a friend. I want to see her. I know she will receive me. I want to go to-morrow. May I venture to ask that you should be my escort?"

"My dear Miss Ripley, certainly," I said. "I will help you with pleasure."

"It must be done," she said, in a low voice. "I have put it off too long. When I marry him he shall not be disappointed."

"I do not understand you," I said, "but I will go with you with the greatest willingness."

She smiled; and the next day, much to my own amazement, I found myself travelling first-class up to London, with little Miss Ripley as my companion. Neither Rowland nor his sister had approved; but Antonia had her own way, and the fact that I would escort her cleared off some difficulties. During our journey she bent towards me and said, in a low tone:--

"Have you ever heard of that most wonderful, that great woman, Madame Sara? "

I looked at her intently.

"I have certainly heard of Madame Sara," I said, with emphasis, "but I sincerely trust that you have nothing to do with her."

"I have known her almost all my life," said the girl. "Mrs. Studley knew her also. I love her very much. I trust her. I am going to see her now."

"What do you mean?"

"It was to her I wired yesterday. She will receive me; she will help me. I am returning to the Folly to-night. Will you add to your kindness by escorting me home?"

"Certainly."

At Euston I put my charge into a hansom, arranging to meet her on the departure platform at twenty minutes to six that evening, and then taking another hansom drove as fast as I could to Vandeleur's address. During the latter part of my journey to town a sudden, almost unaccountable, desire to consult Vandeleur had taken possession of me. I was lucky enough to find this busiest of men at home and at leisure. He gave an exclamation of delight when my name was announced, and then came towards me with outstretched hand.

"I was just about to wire to you, Druce," he said. "From where have you sprung?"

"From no less a place than Rowland's Folly," was my answer.

"More and more amazing. Then you have met Miss Ripley, George Rowland's *fiancée*?"

"You have heard of the engagement, Vandeleur?"

"Who has not? What sort is the young lady?"

"I can tell you all you want to know, for I have travelled up to town with her."

"Ah!"

He was silent for a minute, evidently thinking hard; then drawing a chair near mine he seated himself.

"How long have you been at Rowland's Folly?" he asked.

"Nearly a week. I am to remain until after the wedding. I consider Rowland a lucky man. He is marrying a sweet little girl."

"You think so? By the way, have you ever noticed any peculiarity about her?"

"Only that she is singularly amiable and attractive."

"But any habit--pray think carefully before you answer me."

"Really, Vandeleur, your questions surprise me. Little Miss Ripley is a person with ideas and is not ashamed to stick to her principles. You know, of course, that in a house like Rowland's Folly it is the custom for the ladies to come to dinner in full dress. Now, Miss Ripley won't accommodate herself to this fashion, but *will* wear her dress high to the throat, however gay and festive the occasion."

"Ah! there doesn't seem to be much that, does there?"

"I don't quite agree with you. Pressure has been brought to bear on the girl to make her conform to the usual regulations, and Lady Kennedy, a woman old enough to be her mother, is quite disagreeable on the point."

"But the girl sticks to her determination?"

"Absolutely, although she promises to yield and to wear the conventional dress at the ball given in her honour a week before the wedding."

Vandeleur was silent for nearly a minute; then dropping his voice he said, slowly:--

"Did Miss Ripley ever mention in your presence the name of our mutual foe--Madame Sara?"

"How strange that you should ask! On our journey to town to-day she told me that she knew the woman--she has known her for the greater part of her life--poor child, she even loves her. Vandeleur, that young girl is with Madame Sara now."

"Don't be alarmed, Druce; there is no immediate danger; but I may as well tell you that through my secret agents I have made discoveries which show that Madame has another iron in the fire, that once again she is preparing to convulse Society, and that little Miss Ripley is the victim."

"You must be mistaken."

"So sure am I, that I want your help. You are returning to Rowland's Folly?"

"To-night."

"And Miss Ripley?"

"She goes with me. We meet at Euston for the six o'clock train."

"So far, good. By the way, has Rowland spoken to you lately about the pearl necklace?"

"No; why do you ask?"

"Because I understand that it was his intention to have the pearls slightly altered and reset in order to fit Miss Ripley's slender throat;

also to have a diamond clasp affixed in place of the somewhat insecure one at present attached to the string of pearls. Messrs. Theodore and Mark, of Bond Street, were to undertake the commission. All was in preparation, and a messenger, accompanied by two detectives, was to go to Rowland's Folly to fetch the treasure, when the whole thing was countermanded, Rowland having changed his mind and having decided that the strong-room at the Folly was the best place in which to keep the necklace."

"He has not mentioned the subject to me," I said. "How do you know?"

"I have my emissaries. One thing is certain--little Miss Ripley is to wear the pearls on her wedding-day--and the Italian family, distant relatives of the present Duke of Genoa, to whom the pearls belonged, and from whom they were stolen shortly before the Battle of Agincourt, are again taking active steps to secure them. You have heard the story of the American millionaire? Well, that was a blind--the necklace was in reality to be delivered into the hands of the old family as soon as he had purchased it. Now, Druce, this is the state of things: Madame Sara is an adventuress, and the cleverest woman in the world--Miss Ripley is very young and ignorant. Miss Ripley is to wear the pearls on her wedding-day--and Madame wants them. You can infer the rest."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Go back and watch. If you see anything, to arouse suspicion, wire to me."

"What about telling Rowland?"

"I would rather not consult him. I want to protect Miss Ripley, and at the same time to get Madame into my power. She managed to elude

us last time, but she shall not this. My idea is to inveigle her to her ruin. Why, Druce, the woman is being more trusted and run after and admired day by day. She appeals to the greatest foibles of the world. She knows some valuable secrets, and is an adept in the art of restoring beauty and to a certain extent conquering the ravages of time. She is at present aided by an Arab, one of the most dangerous men I have ever seen, with the subtlety of a serpent, and legerdemain in every one of his ten fingers. It is not an easy thing to entrap her."

"And yet you mean to do it?"

"Some day---some day. Perhaps now."

His eyes were bright. I had seldom seen him look more excited.

After a short time I left him. Miss Ripley met me at Euston. She was silent and unresponsive and looked depressed. Once I saw her put her hand to her neck.

"Are you in pain?" I asked.

"You might be a doctor, Mr. Druce, from your question."

"But answer me," I said.

She was silent for a minute; then she said, slowly:--

"You are good, and I think I ought to tell you. But will you regard it as a secret? You wonder, perhaps, how it is that I don't wear a low dress in the evening. I will tell you why. On my neck, just below the throat, there grew a wart or mole--large, brown, and ugly. The Italian doctors would not remove it on account of the position. It lies just over what they said was an *aberrant* artery, and the removal might cause very dangerous haemorrhage. One day Madame saw it; she said the

doctors were wrong, and that she could easily take it away and leave no mark behind. I hesitated for a long time, but yesterday, when Lady Kennedy spoke to me as she did, I made up my mind. I wired to Madame and went to her to-day. She gave me chloroform and removed the mole. My neck is bandaged up and it smarts a little. I am not to remove the bandage until she sees me again. She is very pleased with the result, and says that my neck will now be beautiful like other women's, and that I can on the night of the ball wear the lovely Brussels lace dress that Lady Kennedy has given me. That is my secret. Will you respect it?"

I promised, and soon afterwards we reached the end of our journey.

A few days went by. One morning at breakfast I noticed that the little signora only played with her food. An open letter lay by her plate. Rowland, by whose side she always sat, turned to her.

"What is the matter, Antonia?" he said. "Have you had an unpleasant letter?"

"It is from----"

"From whom, dear?"

"Madame Sara."

"What did I hear you say?" cried Lady Kennedy.

"I have had a letter from Madame Sara, Lady Kennedy."

"That shocking woman in the Strand--that adventuress. My dear, is it possible that you know her? Her name is in the mouth of everyone. She is quite notorious."

Instantly the room became full of voices, some talking loudly, some

gently, but all praising Madame Sara. Even the men took her part; as to the women, they were unanimous about her charms and her genius.

In the midst of the commotion little Antonia burst into a flood of tears and left the room. Rowland followed her. What next occurred I cannot tell, but in the course of the morning I met Lady Kennedy.

"Well," she said, "that child has won, as I knew she would. Madame Sara wishes to come here, and George says that Antonia's friend is to be invited. I shall be glad when the marriage is over and I can get out of this. It is really detestable that in the last days of my reign I should have to give that woman the *entrée* to the house."

She left me, and I wandered into the entrance hall. There I saw Rowland. He had a telegraph form in his hands, on which some words were written.

"Ah, Druce!" he said. "I am just sending a telegram to the station. What! do you want to send one too?"

For I had seated myself by the table which held the telegraph forms.

"If you don't think I am taking too great a liberty, Rowland," I said, suddenly, "I should like to ask a friend of mine here for a day or two."

"Twenty friends, if you like, my dear Druce. What a man you are to apologize about such a trifle! Who is the special friend?"

"No less a person than Eric Vandeleur, the police-surgeon for Westminster."

"What! Vandeleur—the gayest, jolliest man I have ever met! Would he care to come?"

Rowland's eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"I think so; more especially if you will give me leave to say that you would welcome him."

"Tell him he shall have a thousand welcomes, the best room in the house, the best horse. Get him to come by all means, Druce."

Our two telegrams were sent off. In the course of the morning replies in the affirmative came to each.

That evening Madame Sara arrived. She came by the last train. The brougham was sent to meet her. She entered the house shortly before midnight. I was standing in the hall when she arrived, and I felt a momentary sense of pleasure when I saw her start as her eyes met mine. But she was not a woman to be caught off her guard. She approached me at once with outstretched hand and an eager voice.

"This is charming, Mr. Druce," she said. "I do not think anything pleases me more." Then she added, turning to Rowland, "Mr. Dixon Druce is a very old friend of mine."

Rowland gave me a bewildered glance. Madame turned and began to talk to her hostess. Antonia was standing near one of the open drawing-rooms. She had on a soft dress of pale green silk. I had seldom seen a more graceful little creature. But the expression of her face disturbed me. It wore now the fascinated look of a bird when a snake attracts it. Could Madame Sara be the snake? Was Antonia afraid of this woman?

The next day Lady Kennedy came to me with a confidence.

"I am glad your police friend is coming," she said. "It will be safer."

"Vandeleur arrives at twelve o'clock," was my answer.

"Well, I am pleased. I like that woman less and less. I was amazed when she dared to call you her friend."

"Oh, we have met before on business," I answered, guardedly.

"You won't tell me anything further, Mr. Druce?"

"You must excuse me, Lady Kennedy."

"Her assurance is unbounded," continued the good lady. "She has brought a maid or nurse with her--a most extraordinary-looking woman. That, perhaps, is allowable; but she has also brought her black servant, an Arabian, who goes by the name of Achmed. I must say he is a picturesque creature with his quaint Oriental dress. He was all in flaming yellow this morning, and the embroidery on his jacket was worth a small fortune. But it is the daring of the woman that annoys me. She goes on as though she were somebody."

"She is a very emphatic somebody," I could not help replying. "London Society is at her feet."

"I only hope that Antonia will take her remedies and let her go. The woman has no welcome from me," said the indignant mistress of Rowland's Folly.

I did not see anything of Antonia that morning, and at the appointed time I went down to the station to meet Vandeleur. He arrived in high spirits, did not ask a question with regard to Antonia, received the information that Madame Sara was in the house with stolid silence, and seemed intent on the pleasures of the moment.

"Rowland's Folly!" he said, looking round him as we approached

one of the finest houses in the whole of Yorkshire. "A folly truly, and yet a pleasant one, Druce, eh? I fancy," he added, with a slight smile, "that I am going to have a good time here."

"I hope you will disentangle a most tangled skein," was my reply.

He shrugged his shoulders. Suddenly his manner altered.

"Who is that woman?" he said, with a strain of anxiety quite apparent in his voice.

"Who?" I asked.

"That woman on the terrace in nurse's dress."

"I don't know. She has been brought here by Madame Sara--a sort of maid and nurse as well. I suppose poor little Antonia will be put under her charge."

"Don't let her see me, Druce, that's all. Ah, here is our host."

Vandeleur quickened his movements, and the next instant was shaking hands with Rowland.

The rest of the day passed without adventure. I did not see Antonia. She did not even appear at dinner. Rowland, however, assured me that she was taking necessary rest and would be all right on the morrow. He seemed inclined to be gracious to Madame Sara, and was annoyed at his sister's manner to their guest.

Soon after dinner, as I was standing in one of the smoking-rooms, I felt a light hand on my arm, and, turning, encountered the splendid pose and audacious, bright, defiant glance of Madame herself.

"Mr. Druce," she said, "just one moment. It is quite right that you and

I should be plain with each other. I know the reason why you are here. You have come for the express purpose of spying upon me and spoiling what you consider my game. But understand, Mr. Druce, that there is danger to yourself when you interfere with the schemes of one like me. Forewarned is forearmed."

Someone came into the room and Madame left it.

The ball was but a week off, and preparations for the great event were taking place. Attached to the house at the left was a great room built for this purpose.

Rowland and I were walking down this room on a special morning; he was commenting on its architectural merits and telling me what band he intended to have in the musicians' gallery, when Antonia glided into the room.

"How pale you are, little Tonia!" he said.

This was his favourite name for her. He put his hand under her chin, raised her sweet, blushing face, and looked into her eyes.

"Ah, you want my answer. What a persistent little puss it is! You shall have your way, Tonia –yes, certainly. For you I will grant what has never been granted before. All the same, what will my lady say?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"But you will let me wear them whether she is angry or not?" persisted Antonia.

"Yes, child, I have said it." She took his hand and raised it to her lips, then, with a curtsy, tripped out of the room.

"A rare, bright little bird," he said, turning to me. "Do you know, I feel

that I have done an extraordinarily good thing for myself in securing little Antonia. No troublesome mamma in-law--no brothers and sisters, not my own and yet emphatically mine to consider--just the child herself. I am very happy and a very lucky fellow. I am glad my little girl has no past history. She is just her dear little, dainty self, no more and no less."

"What did she want with you now?" I asked.

"Little witch," he said, with a laugh. "The pearls--*the* pearls. She insists on wearing the great necklace on the night of the ball. Dear little girl. I can fancy how the baubles will gleam and shine on her fair throat."

I made no answer, but I was certain that little Antonia's request did not emanate from herself. I thought that I would search for Vandeleur and tell him of the circumstance, but the next remark of Rowland's nipped my project in the bud.

"By the way, your friend has promised to be back for dinner. He left here early this morning."

"Vandeleur?" I cried.

"Yes, he has gone to town. What a first-rate fellow he is!"

"He tells a good story," I answered.

"Capital. Who would suspect him of being the greatest criminal expert of the day? But, thank goodness, we have no need of his services at Rowland's Folly."

Late in the evening Vandeleur returned. He entered the house just before dinner. I observed by the brightness of his eyes and the

intense gravity of his manner that he was satisfied with himself. This in his case was always a good sign. At dinner he was his brightest self, courteous to everyone, and to Madame Sara in particular.

Late that night, as I was preparing to go to bed, he entered my room without knocking.

"Well, Druce," he said, "it is all right."

"All right!" I cried; "what do you mean?"

"You will soon know. The moment I saw that woman I had my suspicions. I was in town to-day making some very interesting inquiries. I am primed now on every point. Expect a *dénouement* of a startling character very soon, but be sure of one thing--however black appearances may be the little bride is safe, and so are the pearls."

He left me without waiting for my reply.

The next day passed, and the next. I seemed to live on tenter-hooks. Little Antonia was gay and bright like a bird. Madame's invitation had been extended by Lady Kennedy at Rowland's command to the day after the ball--little Antonia skipped when she heard it.

"I love her," said the girl.

More and more guests arrived--the days flew on wings--the evenings were lively. Madame was a power in herself. Vandeleur was another. These two, sworn foes at heart, aided and abetted each other to make things go brilliantly for the rest of the guests. Rowland was in the highest spirits.

At last the evening before the ball came and went. Vandeleur's *grand coup* had not come off. I retired to bed as usual. The night was

a stormy one--rain rattled against the window-panes, the wind sighed and shuddered. I had just put out my candle and was about to seek forgetfulness in sleep when once again in his unceremonious fashion Vandeleur burst into my room.

"I want you at once, Druce, in the bed-room of Madame Sara's servant. Get into your clothes as fast as you possibly can and join me there."

He left the room as abruptly as he had entered it. I hastily dressed, and with stealthy steps, in the dead of night, to the accompaniment of the ever-increasing tempest, sought the room in question.

I found it brightly lighted; Vandeleur pacing the floor as though he himself were the very spirit of the storm; and, most astonishing sight of all, the nurse whom Madame Sara had brought to Rowland's Folly, and whose name I had never happened to hear, gagged and bound in a chair drawn into the centre of the room.

"So I think that is all, nurse," said Vandeleur, as I entered. "Pray take a chair, Druce. We quite understand each other, don't we, nurse, and the facts are wonderfully simple. Your name as entered in the archives of crime at Westminster is not as you have given out, Mary Jessop, but Rebecca Curt. You escaped from Portland prison on the night of November 30th, just a year ago. You could not have managed your escape but for the connivance of the lady in whose service you are now. Your crime was forgery, with a strong and very daring attempt at poisoning. Your victim was a harmless invalid lady. Your knowledge of crime, therefore, is what may be called extensive. There are yet eleven years of your sentence to run. You have doubtless served Madame Sara well--but perhaps you can serve me better. You know the consequence if you refuse, for I explained that to you frankly and clearly before this gentleman came into the room. Druce, will you oblige me--will you lock the door while I remove the

gag from the prisoner's mouth?"

I hurried to obey. The woman breathed more freely when the gag was removed. Her face was a swarthy red all over. Her crooked eyes favoured us with many shifty glances.

"Now, then, have the goodness to begin, Rebecca Curt," said Vandeleur. "Tell us everything you can."

She swallowed hard, and said:--

"You have forced me----"

"We won't mind that part," interrupted Vandeleur. "The story, please, Mrs. Curt."

If looks could kill, Rebecca Curt would have killed Vandeleur then. He gave her in return a gentle, bland glance, and she started on her narrative.

"Madame knows a secret about Antonia Ripley."

"Of what nature?"

"It concerns her parentage."

"And that is?"

The woman hesitated and writhed.

"The names of her parents, please," said Vandeleur, in a voice cold as ice and hard as iron.

"Her father was Italian by birth."

"His name?"

"Count Gioletti. He was unhappily married, and stabbed his English wife in an access of jealousy when Antonia was three years old. He was executed for the crime on the 20th of June, 18--. The child was adopted and taken out of the country by an English lady who was present in court--her name was Mrs. Studley. Madame Sara was also present. She was much interested in the trial, and had an interview afterwards with Mrs. Studley. It was arranged that Antonia should be called by the surname of Ripley--the name of an old relative of Mrs. Studley's--and that her real name and history were never to be told to her."

"I understand," said Vandeleur, gently. "This is of deep interest, is it not, Druce?"

I nodded, too much absorbed in watching the face of the woman to have time for words.

"But now," continued Vandeleur, "there are reasons why Madame should change her mind with regard to keeping the matter a close secret--is that not so, Mrs. Curt?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Curt.

"You will have the kindness to continue."

"Madame has an object--she blackmails the signora. She wants to get the signora completely into her power."

"Indeed! Is she succeeding?"

"Yes."

"How has she managed? Be very careful what you say, please."

"The mode is subtle--the young lady had a disfiguring mole or wart on her neck, just below the throat. Madame removed the mole."

"Quite a simple process, I doubt not," said Vandeleur, in a careless tone.

"Yes, it was done easily--I was present. The young lady was conducted into a chamber with a red light."

Vandeleur's extraordinary eyes suddenly leapt into fire. He took a chair and drew it so close to Mrs. Curt's that his face was within a foot or two of hers.

"Now, you will be very careful what you say," he remarked. "You know the consequence to yourself unless this narrative is absolutely reliable."

She began to tremble, but continued:--

"I was present at the operation. Not a single ray of ordinary light was allowed to penetrate. The patient was put under chloroform. The mole was removed. Afterwards Madame wrote something on her neck. The words were very small and neatly done--they formed a cross on the young lady's neck. Afterwards I heard what they were."

"Repeat them."

"I can't. You will know in the moment of victory."

"I choose to know now! A detective from my division at Westminster comes here early to-morrow morning--he brings hand-cuffs--and----"

"I will tell you," interrupted the woman. "The words were these:--

"'I AM THE DAUGHTER OF PAOLO GIOLETTI, WHO WAS EXECUTED FOR THE MURDER OF MY MOTHER, JUNE 20TH, 18--.'" "

"How were the words written?"

"With nitrate of silver."

"Fiend!" muttered Vandeleur.

He jumped up and began to pace the room. I had never seen his face so black with ungovernable rage.

"You know what this means?" he said at last to me. "Nitrate of silver eats into the flesh and is permanent. Once exposed to the light the case is hopeless, and the helpless child becomes her own executioner."

The nurse looked up restlessly.

"The operation was performed in a room with a red light," she said, "and up to the present the words have not been seen. Unless the young lady exposes her neck to the blue rays of ordinary light they never will be. In order to give her a chance to keep her deadly secret Madame has had a large carbuncle on the deepest red cut and prepared. It is in the shape of a cross, and is suspended to a fine gold, almost invisible, thread. This the signora is to wear when in full evening dress. It will keep in its place, for the back of the cross will be dusted with gum."

"But it cannot be Madame's aim to hide the fateful words," said Vandeleur. "You are concealing something, nurse."

Her face grew an ugly red. After a pause the following words came out with great reluctance:--

"The young lady wears the carbuncle as a reward."

"Ah," said Vandeleur, "now we are beginning to see daylight. As a reward for what?"

"Madame wants something which the signora can give her. It is a case of exchange; the carbuncle which hides the fatal secret is given in exchange for that which the signora can transfer to Madame."

"I understand at last," said Vandeleur. "Really, Druce, I feel myself privileged to say that of all the malevolent----" he broke off abruptly. "Never mind," he said, "we are keeping nurse. Nurse, you have answered all my questions with praiseworthy exactitude, but before you return to your well-earned slumbers I have one more piece of information to seek from you. Was it entirely by Miss Ripley's desire, or was it in any respect owing to Madame Sara's instigations, that the young lady is permitted to wear the pearl necklace on the night of the dance? You have, of course, nurse, heard of the pearl necklace?"

Rebecca Curt's face showed that she undoubtedly had.

"I see you are acquainted with that most interesting story. Now, answer my question. The request to wear the necklace to-morrow night was suggested by Madame, was it not?"

"Ah, yes--yes!" cried the woman, carried out of herself by sudden excitement. "It was to that point all else tended--all, all!"

"Thank you, that will do. You understand that from this day you are absolutely in my service. As long as you serve me faithfully you are safe."

"I will do my best, sir," she replied, in a modest tone, her eyes seeking the ground.

The moment we were alone Vandeleur turned to me.

"Things are simplifying themselves," he said.

"I fail to understand," was my answer. "I should say that complications, and alarming ones, abound."

"Nevertheless, I see my way clear. Druce, it is not good for you to be so long out of bed, but in order that you may repose soundly when you return to your room I will tell you frankly what my mode of operations will be to-morrow. The simplest plan would be to tell Rowland everything, but for various reasons that does not suit me. I take an interest in the little girl, and if she chooses to conceal her secret (at present, remember, she does not know it, but the poor child will certainly be told everything to-morrow) I don't intend to interfere. In the second place, I am anxious to lay a trap for Madame. Now, two things are evident. Madame Sara's object in coming here is to steal the pearls. Her plan is to terrify the little signora into giving them to her in order that the fiendish words written on the child's neck may not be seen. As the signora must wear a dress with a low neck to-morrow night, she can only hide the words by means of the red carbuncle. Madame will only give her the carbuncle if she, in exchange, gives Madame the pearls. You see?"

"I do," I answered, slowly.

He drew himself up to his slender height, and his eyes became full of suppressed laughter.

"The child's neck has been injured with nitrate of silver. Nevertheless, until it is exposed to the blue rays of light the ominous, fiendish words will not appear on her white throat. Once they do appear they will be indelible. Now, listen! Madame, with all her

cunning, forgot something. To the action of nitrate of silver there is an antidote. This is nothing more or less than our old friend cyanide of potassium. To-morrow nurse, under my instructions, will take the little patient into a room carefully prepared with the hateful red light, and will bathe the neck just where the baleful words are written with a solution of cyanide of potassium. The nitrate of silver will then become neutralized and the letters will never come out."

"But the child will not know that. The terror of Madame's cruel story will be upon her, and she will exchange the pearls for the cross."

"I think not, for I shall be there to prevent it. Now, Druce, I have told you all that is necessary. Go to bed and sleep comfortably."

The next morning dawned dull and sullen, but the fierce storm of the night before was over. The ravages which had taken place, however, in the stately old park were very manifest, for trees had been torn up by their roots and some of the stateliest and largest of the oaks had been deprived of their best branches.

Little Miss Ripley did not appear at all that day. I was not surprised at her absence. The time had come when doubtless Madame found it necessary to divulge her awful scheme to the unhappy child. In the midst of that gay houseful of people no one specially missed her; even Rowland was engaged with many necessary matters, and had little time to devote to his future wife. The ballroom, decorated with real flowers, was a beautiful sight.

Vandeleur, our host, and I paced up and down the long room. Rowland was in great excitement, making many suggestions, altering this decoration and the other. The flowers were too profuse in one place, too scanty in another. The lights, too, were not bright enough.

"By all means have the ball-room well lighted," said Vandeleur. "In a

room like this, so large, and with so many doors leading into passages and sitting-out rooms, it is well to have the light as brilliant as possible. You will forgive my suggestion, Mr. Rowland, when I say I speak entirely from the point of view of a man who has some acquaintance with the treacherous dealings of crime."

Rowland started.

"Are you afraid that an attempt will be made here to-night to steal the necklace?" he asked, suddenly.

"We won't talk of it," replied Vandeleur. "Act on my suggestion and you have nothing to fear."

Rowland shrugged his shoulders, and crossing the room gave some directions to several men who were putting in the final touches.

Nearly a hundred guests were expected to arrive from the surrounding country, and the house was as full as it could possibly hold. Rowland was to open the ball with little Antonia.

There was no late dinner that day, and as evening approached Vandeleur sought me.

"I say, Druce, dress as early as you can, and come down and meet me in our host's study."

I looked at him in astonishment, but did not question him. I saw that he was intensely excited. His face was cold and stern; it invariably wore that expression when he was most moved.

I hurried into my evening clothes and came down again. Vandeleur was standing in the study talking to Rowland. The guests were beginning to arrive. The musicians were tuning-up in the adjacent

ball-room, and signs of hurry and festival pervaded the entire place. Rowland was in high spirits and looked very handsome. He and Vandeleur talked together, and I stood a little apart. Vandeleur was just about to make a light reply to one of our host's questions when we heard the swish of drapery in the passage outside, and little Antonia, dressed for her first ball, entered. She was in soft white lace and her neck and arms were bare. The effect of her entrance was somewhat startling and would have arrested attention even were we not all specially interested in her. Her face, neck, and arms were nearly as white as her dress, her dark eyes were much dilated, and her soft black hair surrounded her small face like a shadow. In the midst of the whiteness a large red cross sparkled on her throat like living fire. Rowland uttered an exclamation and then stood still; as for Vandeleur and myself, we held our breath in suspense. What might not the next few minutes reveal?

It was the look on Antonia's face that aroused our fears. What ailed her? She came forward like one blind, or as one who walks in her sleep. One hand was held out slightly in advance, as though she meant to guide herself by the sense of touch. She certainly saw neither Vandeleur nor me, but when she got close to Rowland the blind expression left her eyes. She gave a sudden and exceedingly bitter cry, and ran forward, flinging herself into his arms.

"Kiss me once before we part for ever. Kiss me just once before we part," she said.

"My dear little one," I heard him answer, "what is the meaning of this? You are not well. There, Antonia, cease trembling. Before we part, my dear? But there is no thought of parting. Let me look at you, darling. Ah!"

He held her at arm's length and gazed at her critically.

"No girl could look sweeter, Antonia," he said, "and you have come now for the finishing touch--the beautiful pearls. But what is this, my dear? Why should you spoil your white neck with anything so incongruous? Let me remove it."

She put up her hand to her neck, thus covering the crimson cross. Then her wild eyes met Vandeleur's. She seemed to recognise his presence for the first time.

"You can safely remove it," he said to her, speaking in a semi-whisper.

Rowland gave him an astonished glance. His look seemed to say, "Leave us," but Vandeleur did not move.

"We must see this thing out," he said to me.

Meanwhile Rowland's arm encircled Antonia's neck, and his hand sought for the clasp of the narrow gold thread that held the cross in place.

"One moment," said Antonia.

She stepped back a pace; the trembling in her voice left it, it gathered strength, her fear gave way to dignity. This was the hour of her deepest humiliation, and yet she looked noble.

"My dearest," she said, "my kindest and best of friends. I had yielded to temptation, terror made me weak, the dread of losing you unnerved me, but I won't come to you charged with a sin on my conscience; I won't conceal anything from you. I know you won't wish me *now* to become your wife nevertheless, you shall know the truth."

"What do you mean, Antonia? What do your strange words signify?"

Are you mad?" said George Rowland.

"No, I wish I were; but I am no mate for you; I cannot bring dishonour to your honour. Madame said it could be hidden that this"--she touched the cross--"would hide it. For this I was to pay--yes, to pay a shameful price. I consented, for the terror was so cruel. But I--I came here and looked into your face and I could not do it. Madame shall have her blood-red cross back and you shall know all. You shall see." With a fierce gesture she tore the cross from her neck and flung it on the floor.

"The pearls for this," she cried; "the pearls were the price; but I would rather you knew. Take me up to the brightest light and you will see for yourself."

Rowland's face wore an expression impossible to fathom. The red cross lay on the floor; Antonia's eyes were fixed on his. She was no child to be humoured; she was a woman and despair was driving her wild. When she said, "Take me up to the brightest light," he took her hand without a word and led her to where the full rays of a powerful electric light turned the place into day.

"Look!" cried Antonia, "look! Madame wrote it here--here."

She pointed to her throat.

"The words are hidden, but this light will soon cause them to appear. You will see for yourself, you will know the truth. At last you will understand who I really am."

There was silence for a few minutes. Antonia kept pointing to her neck. Rowland's eyes were fixed upon it. After a breathless period of agony Vandeleur stepped forward.

"Miss Antonia," he cried, "you have suffered enough. I am in a position to relieve your terrors. You little guessed, Rowland, that for the last few days I have taken an extreme liberty with regard to you. I have been in your house simply and solely in the exercise of my professional qualities. In the exercise of my manifest duties I came across a ghastly secret. Miss Antonia was to be subjected to a cruel ordeal. Madame Sara, for reasons of her own, had invented one of the most fiendish plots it has ever been my unhappy lot to come across. But I have been in time. Miss Antonia, you need fear nothing. Your neck contains no ghastly secret. Listen! I have saved you. The nurse whom Madame believed to be devoted to her service considered it best for prudential reasons to transfer herself to me. Under my directions she bathed your neck to-day with a preparation of cyanide of potassium. You do not know what that is, but it is a chemical preparation which neutralizes the effect of what that horrible woman has done. You have nothing to fear—your secret lies buried beneath your white skin."

"But what is the mystery?" said Rowland. "Your actions, Antonia, and your words, Vandeleur, are enough to drive a man mad. What is it all about? I will know." "Miss Ripley can tell you or not, as she pleases," replied Vandeleur. "The unhappy child was to be blackmailed, Madame Sara's object being to secure the pearl necklace worth a King's ransom. The cross was to be given in exchange for the necklace. That was her aim, but she is defeated. Ask me no questions, sir. If this young lady chooses to tell you, well and good, but if not the secret is her own."

Vandeleur bowed and backed towards me.

"The secret is mine," cried Antonia, "but it also shall be yours, George. I will not be your wife with this ghastly thing between us. You may never speak to me again, but you shall know all the truth."

"Upon my word, a brave girl, and I respect her," whispered Vandeleur. "Come, Druce, our work so far as Miss Antonia is concerned is finished."

We left the room.

"Now to see Madame Sara," continued my friend. "We will go to her rooms. Walls have ears in her case; she doubtless knows the whole *dénouement* already; but we will find her at once, she can scarcely have escaped yet."

He flew upstairs. I followed him. We went from one corridor to another. At last we found Madame's apartments. Her bedroom door stood wide open. Rebecca Curt was standing in the middle of the room. Madame herself was nowhere to be seen, but there was every sign of hurried departure.

"Where is Madame Sara?" inquired Vandeleur, in a peremptory voice.

Rebecca Curt shrugged her shoulders.

"Has she gone down? Is she in the ball-room? Speak!" said Vandeleur.

The nurse gave another shrug.

"I only know that Achmed the Arabian rushed in here a few minutes ago," was her answer. "He was excited. He said something to Madame. I think he had been listening--eavesdropping, you call it. Madame was convulsed with rage. She thrust a few things together and she's gone. Perhaps you can catch her."

Vandeleur's face turned white.

"I'll have a try," he said. "Don't keep me, Druce."

He rushed away. I don't know what immediate steps he took, but he did not return to Rowland's Folly. Neither was Madame Sara captured.

But notwithstanding her escape and her meditated crime, notwithstanding little Antonia's hour of terror, the ball went on merrily, and the bride-elect opened it with her future husband. On her fair neck gleamed the pearls, lovely in their soft lustre. What she told Rowland was never known; how he took the news is a secret between Antonia and himself. But one thing is certain: no one was more gallant in his conduct, more ardent in his glances of love, than was the master of Rowland's Folly that night. They were married on the day fixed, and Madame Sara was defeated.

(End.)

III.--The Face of the Abbot

The Sorceress of the Strand.

BY L.T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

III.--The face of the abbot

from the _Strand magazine_, 1902-dec.

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. The 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 we 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 un 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 undiscoverable--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.

(End.)