

The Sorceress of the Strand.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

IV.—THE TALK OF THE TOWN.



HERE is such a thing as being haunted by an idea or by a personality. About this time Vandeleur and I began to have nightmares with regard to Madame Sara. She visited us in our dreams, and in our waking dreams she was also our companion. We suspected her unseen influence on all occasions. We dreaded to see her visible presence in the street, in the Park, at the play—in short, wherever we went. This sort of thing was bad for both of us. It began to get on our nerves. It takes a great deal to get on the iron nerves of a man like Vandeleur; nevertheless, I began to think that they were seriously shaken when I received, on a certain afternoon in late October, the following note:—

“MY DEAR DRUCE,—There are fresh developments in the grand hunt. Come and dine with me to-morrow evening to meet Professor Piozzi. New problems are on foot.”

The grand hunt could, of course, only mean one thing. What was up now? What in the name of fortune had Professor Piozzi, the greatest and youngest scientist of the day, to do with Madame Sara? But the chance of meeting him was a strong inducement to accept Vandeleur's invitation. He was our greatest experimental chemist. Six months ago his name had been on everyone's lips as the discoverer of a new artificial lighting agent which, if commercially feasible, would take the place of all other means hitherto used.

Professor Piozzi was not yet thirty years of age. He was an Italian by birth, but spoke English as well as though it were his native tongue.

At the appointed hour I found Vandeleur standing by his hearth. A table in a distant recess was laid for dinner. He greeted me with a gleam of pleasure in his eyes.

“What is the new problem?” I asked. “It goes without saying that it has to do with Madame Sara.”

“I am glad you were able to come before Piozzi put in an appearance,” was Vandeleur's grave answer.

He paused for an instant, and then he burst out with vehemence:—

“I owe Sara a debt of gratitude. Hunt-

ing her as a recreation is as good as hunting a man-eating tiger. I am getting at her now by watching the movements of her victim.”

“Who is the victim?” I interrupted.

“No less a person than Professor Piozzi.”

“Impossible,” I answered.

“Fact, all the same,” he replied. “The Professor, notwithstanding his genius, is in many ways credulous, unsuspecting, and easily imposed upon.”

“Nevertheless, I fail to understand,” I said.

“Have you ever heard of the subtle power of love?”

As Vandeleur spoke he stared hard at me, then burst into an uneasy laugh.

“The Professor is in love,” he said. “Madame's last move is truly prompted by genius. She has taken to exploiting one of the most extraordinary-looking girls who have electrified society for many a day. It isn't her mere beauty that draws everyone to Donna Marta; it is her peculiarity. She has all the ways of an unconscious syren, for never was anyone less self-conscious or more apparently indifferent to admiration.”

“I have not heard of her,” I said.

“Then you have allowed the talk of the town to slip past you, Druce,” was Vandeleur's answer. “Donna Marta is the talk of the town. No one knows where she has sprung from; no one can confidently assert that this country or the other has had the honour of her nationality. She belongs to Madame Sara; she accompanies her wherever she goes, and Professor Piozzi is the victim.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Certain. He follows them about like a shadow. Madame is keeping more or less in the background for the present. Donna Marta is the lure. We shall next hear of an engagement between our young friend and this girl, whose antecedents no one knows anything about. Madame has an object, of course. She means mischief.”

It was my custom never to interrupt Vandeleur when he was explaining one of his theories, so I sat back in my chair and allowed him to proceed without comment on my part.

“At the present moment,” he continued, “I happen to know that the Professor has run to earth another of his amazing discoveries in the carbon compounds. No one

but himself knows what it is as yet, not even his assistants. Next week he is going to explode the bomb-shell in the scientific world at a lecture at the Royal Institution. Everyone will flock there on the tip-toe of expectation and curiosity. The thing is at present a dead secret, and the title of the lecture not even mentioned. He means to electrify the world. It is his little amusement to do this, as he did the Ethylene light affair. The man is, of course, a phenomenon, a genius, probably the most brilliant of our times. He is absolutely unsuspecting and absolutely unworldly. I am not going to see him ruin himself if I can help it."

"I perceive that you are in earnest," I said; "but how are you to prevent a man who is his own master from adopting his own methods, even in the subtle cause of love? Supposing your young Professor loves Donna Marta, how are you to stop him?"

"Time will prove how," he remarked; "but stop him I will."

The bell whirred, and the next moment Professor Piozzi entered. I looked at him with keen interest. From his photographs, reproduced freely in the illustrated papers, I had expected to see a young and good-

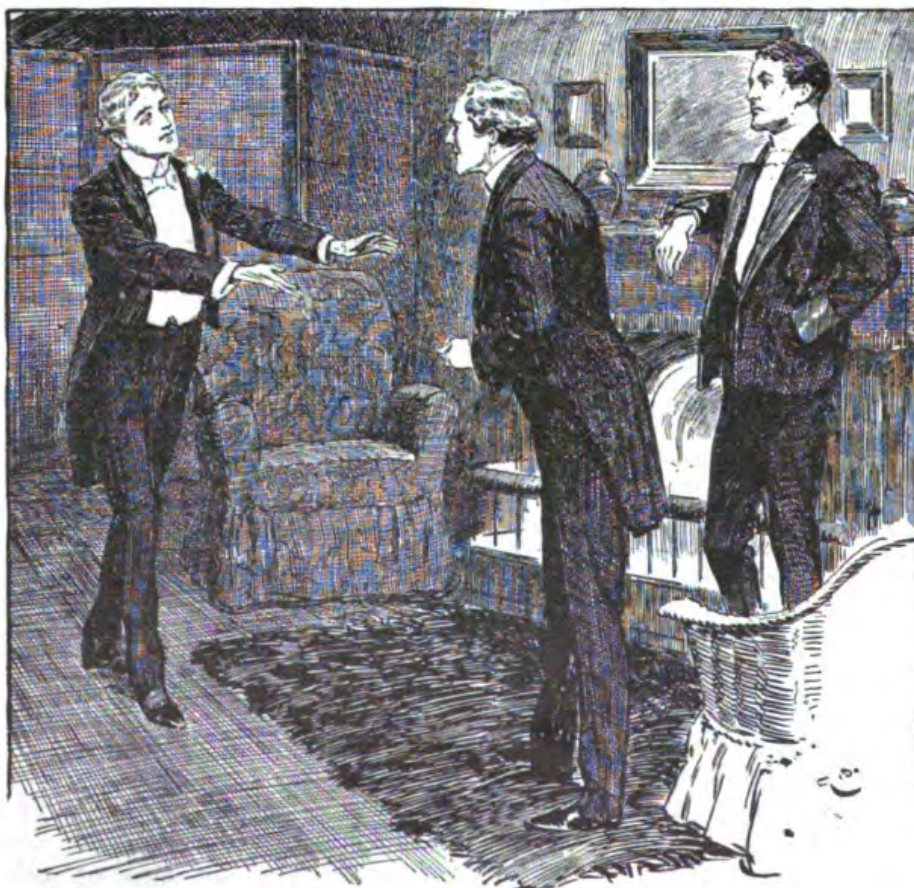
looking man, with a keen, intelligent face; but I was scarcely prepared for his juvenile appearance. He was tall in figure, well made, somewhat slender; his hair was of a fair flaxen shade; his eyes were wide open and of a clear blue. He had a massive forehead, dark eyebrows, and a clean-shaven face. His whole appearance was that of an ordinary, good-looking, everyday sort of young man, and I examined his features with extreme curiosity, endeavouring to detect anywhere a sign of genius. I could not do so. The Professor's whole appearance was everyday; not a doubt of it. He was well dressed and had easy, courteous manners, and upon a finger of his left hand there gleamed a ring, a Royal gift from the King of his native land.

We sat down to dinner, and the conversation was light, pleasant, and sufficiently witty to cause the moments to fly. No one knew better than Vandeleur how to make a man feel at home in his own house, and I could see that Piozzi was enjoying himself in a boyish way.

It was not until the meal was nearly over that the Professor caused us both to start, and listen with extreme attention. He

began to talk of Madame Sara. He spoke of her with enthusiasm. She was the cleverest woman in London, and, with one exception, the most beautiful. Her scientific attainments were marvellous. He considered himself extremely lucky to have made her acquaintance.

"The sort of knowledge you allude to," replied Vandeleur, in a very grave tone, "that scientific knowledge which Madame possesses, and which is not a smattering, but a real thing, makes a woman at times—dangerous."



"PROFESSOR PIOZZI ENTERED."

"I do not follow you," replied the Professor, knitting his brows. "Madame is the reverse of dangerous; she would help a fellow at a pinch. She is as good as she is beautiful."

Vandeleur made no reply. I was about to speak, but I saw by his manner that he would rather turn the conversation.

Once more we chatted on less exciting topics, and it was not until the servants had withdrawn that Vandeleur proceeded to unfold the real business of the evening.

"So you are going to astonish us all next week, Professor, at the Royal Institution? Is it true that you, and you alone, possess the key of the discourse that you are to give us?"

"Quite true," he replied, with a smile. "I cannot help having the dramatic instincts of my race. I love an artistic effect, and I think I can guarantee you English chemists a little thrill on Saturday week. My paper was ready a month ago, and since finishing it I have been having a pleasant time. Until a month ago your London was more or less a closed book to me. Now, Madame Sara and her young companion, Donna Marta, have been taking me round. I have enjoyed myself, not a doubt of it."

He leant back in his chair and smiled.

"That woman does plan things in a most delightful manner," he continued, "and whether she entertains in her own wonderful reception-rooms at the back of her shop in the Strand, or whether I meet her at the houses of mutual friends, or at the play, or the opera, she is always bright, vivacious, charming. Donna Marta, of course, adds her share to the delights. Yes, it is all happiness," continued the young Professor, rubbing his hands together in a boyish manner. "You English," he added, fixing his bright blue eyes on Vandeleur's saturnine face, "are so dull, so—I might add—*triste*. And yet," he added, quickly, "you have your charm. Oh, undoubtedly yes. Your sincerity is so marvellous, so—I ought to add—refreshing. One can rely on it. But Madame has also the sincere air, and yet to her are given the brightness and vivacity which come from living under bluer skies than yours."

The Professor's face was flushed; he looked from Vandeleur to me with eagerness. Vandeleur drew his chair a trifle closer. Then, without warning, as though he could not help himself, he sprang to his feet.

"Professor Piozzi," he said, "you have given our nation, perhaps unwittingly, a rare and valuable tribute. You have just spoken of our sincerity. I trust that we *are* sincere, and I trust also that, so long as England

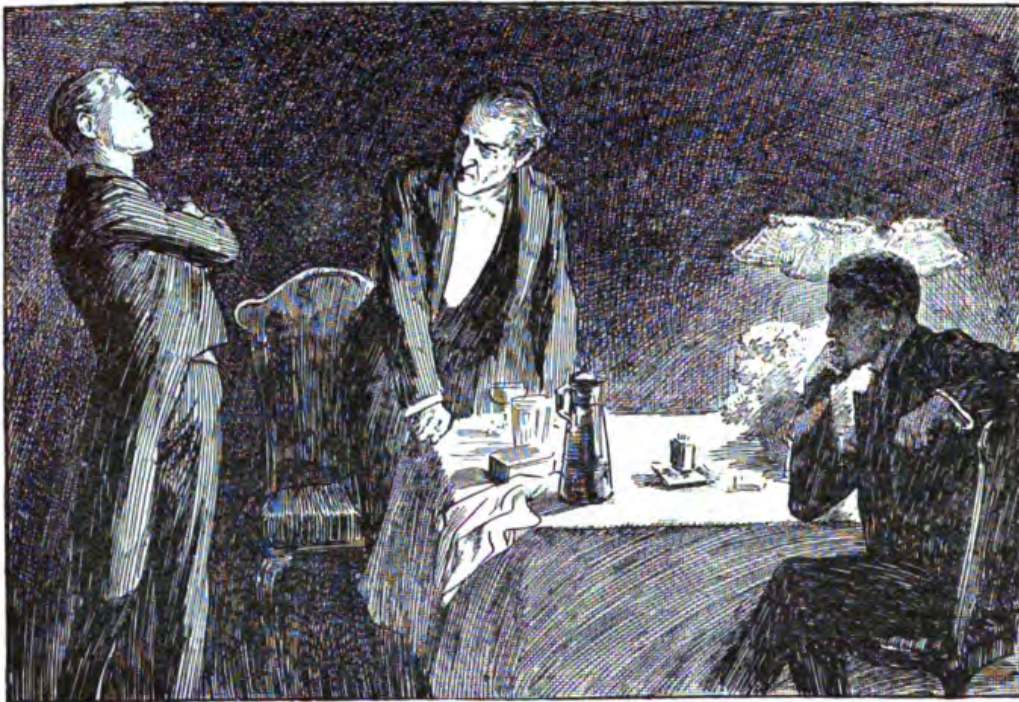
remains England, an Englishman's word will be his bond. The best inheritance an Englishman can receive from his forefathers is the power on all occasions to speak the truth. You are my guest to-night. I have the greatest respect for you; I admire your genius as I never thought to admire the genius of any man. It is most painful to me to have to say a word that may seem discourteous to you, an honoured guest, but my heritage as an Englishman forces me to speak the truth. You know what I am—an official criminal agent of the police. I will be quite candid with you. My invitation to you to-night was not purely the disinterested one of enjoying the honour of your company, but also to give you a warning with regard to Madame Sara and the young girl who accompanies her into society. They are both dangerous. I speak with knowledge. It is true that the girl herself is in all probability only the tool; but the woman—! Professor, I have met that woman before; so has my friend Druce. Our acquaintance with her has not been agreeable. May I proceed?"

The Professor's face had now turned almost crimson; his blue eyes were starting from his head; he kept clenching and unclenching his right hand as though he could scarcely contain himself. Vandeleur's words, however, seemed to force him into an attitude of attention. He listened as though mesmerized.

My friend then proceeded to give a vivid sketch of some of the episodes which had fallen to our share in the life of Madame Sara. He spoke slowly, with great emphasis and precision. He stated his case as though he were addressing a jury in a court of justice, scoring point after point with brevity and brilliance. When at last he ceased to speak the Professor was silent for half a minute, then he rose with a jerk to his feet. He was trembling, and his eyes flashed fire.

"Mr. Vandeleur," he said, "we are acquaintances of only a year's standing; in that time we have had some pleasant interviews. Your business is not an attractive one, even when confined to its official precincts; but to introduce it into private affairs is not to be tolerated. You exceed the limits of propriety in dictating to me as to the choice of the list of my friends. Please understand that from that list I erase your name."

He bowed stiffly, and walking across the room took up his hat and coat and slammed the door behind him.



"YOU EXCEED THE LIMITS OF PROPRIETY IN DICTATING TO ME."

I glanced at Vandeleur in amazement. His eyes met mine.

"The man must have his fling," he said. "I did what I did for the best, and am not sorry. He is in love with the mysterious girl, who has been brought to England, doubtless, for the express purpose of working his ruin. We must find out all we can about her as quickly as possible. Poor young Professor, I should like to save him, and I will, too, if in the power of man. His powers of research must not be lost to the glories of the scientific world."

"You must admit, Vandeleur," I said, "that you were a trifle harsh in your dealings with him. Granted that he is in love with Donna Marta, can you expect him to take your warning tamely?"

Vandeleur was silent for a minute.

"I do not believe my severe words will do any harm in the long run," he said, then. "The man is a foreigner; he has not an Englishman's knack of keeping his temper under control. He will cool down presently and what I have said will return to him. They will come to him when he is talking to Donna Marta; when Madame Sara is throwing her spells over him. Yes, I am not sorry I have spoken."

"What do you suppose Madame is after?" I interrupted. "What can be her motive? It is not money, for the man is not well off, is he?"

"Not a thousand a year. Bah! and he

might be a millionaire if he would only use his ideas commercially. It is the old story—one man finds the brains and a hundred others profit by them. He is a walking test-tube, and doesn't care a sou who profits by his inventions."

"Then you think she is picking his brains?"

"Of course, and she will pick a plum, too, bang it off in England, scoop a million, and we have lost her."

"Good for society if we do lose her," I could not help remarking.

"By no means good for me," replied the detective. "I have staked my reputation on bringing this woman to book. She shall not escape."

Vandeleur and I sat and talked for some little time longer, then I left him and returned to my own rooms. I sat up a long time busy over several matters; but when I retired to rest it was not only to dream of Madame Sara, but of the fascinating young Donna Marta and the boyish-looking Professor.

I dined with Vandeleur on Wednesday evening, and little guessed then how soon events would hurry to a remarkable issue, in which I was to play a somewhat important part.

It is my custom to lunch at the Ship and Turtle, an hour that I always enjoy in the midst of my day's work, for I meet many old friends there, and our meal, as a rule, is a merry one.

One of my most constant companions on these occasions is a man of the name of Samuel Pollak, the senior partner in the firm of Pollak and Harman, patent agents, Bishopsgate Street. Pollak is one of those breezy, good-natured individuals who make a pleasant impression wherever they go. He is stout of build and somewhat rubicund of face, an excellent man of business and a firm friend. I have liked him for years, and am always glad when he occupies the same table with me at lunch.

On the Friday following Vandeleur's dinner Pollak and I met as usual. I noticed on his entrance into the lunch-room a particularly merry and pleased expression on his face. He sat down and ordered a quart of the most expensive brand of champagne. He insisted on my joining him in a bumper of the frothy wine, and after drinking his health I could not help exclaiming:—

"You seem pretty jolly this morning, Pollak. A successful flutter in Khakis?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" was the answer. "Better than a flutter, my boy. Certainties nowadays are what I am thinking of, and I have just bagged one, and a fat one."

"Capital. Tell me all about it," I answered. "What is the yarn, Pollak?"

He gave me a somewhat vague smile, which seemed to me to mingle a sort of contempt with amusement, and said, impressively:—

"A roaring commission, the biggest that has been in the market for the last ten years. Patent rights for every country on earth, and a hundred shares allotted gratis when the thing is floated. I tell you, Druce," he added, raising his voice, "if it comes off I retire with as near fifteen thousand a year as I want."

"You were born under a lucky star, there's no doubt of that," I answered, somewhat sharply, for Pollak's manner had never impressed me less favourably than it did this morning. He was evidently almost beside himself with excitement.

"I congratulate you, of course," I said, after a moment. "Ask me to the house-warming of your castle in Scotland, whenever that event comes off. But can't you give me a hint with regard to this magnificent affair? I am, as you know, a struggling pauper, and should like to have my share of the pickings if there are any at your disposal to give away."

"My lips are sealed," he answered at once. "I am sorry, for there is no one I should like better to help. But I think I am justified in telling you this—the City will hum

when the news is out. It is immense, it is colossal, it is paralyzing."

"You excite my curiosity to a remarkable extent," I could not help saying. "Curiosity has a great deal to do with my trade, as you know."

He finished his glass of champagne and set it down. His eyes, as he fixed them on me, were full of laughter. I almost wondered whether he was amusing himself at my expense; but no, his next words were sane enough.

"There is another little matter I can inform you about, Druce, without breaking any confidence. I happen to know that the fortunate patentee is a friend of yours."

"A friend of mine?" I exclaimed. "An acquaintance, perhaps. I haven't three friends in the world."

"A great friend—an admirer, too," he went on.

"An admirer!" I repeated, staring across at him. "A devoted admirer! Who is he? Come, out with it, Pollak; don't keep me on tenter-hooks."

"Think over your list of admirers," he cried, tantalizingly.

"I will hazard a guess, then; but he isn't an admirer. Vandeleur," I said.

"Ha, ha!" he roared. "Better and better. She admires him, too, I believe."

"She!"

A strange thought seized me. I felt the high spirits which Pollak had infected me with depart as in a flash. I knew that in spite of every effort my face had altered in expression. Pollak gazed at me and said, in a tone of triumph:—

"I see that you guess. The cat is out of the bag."

He chuckled.

"Isn't it superb?" he added.

"Madame Sara!" I ejaculated, when I could find words.

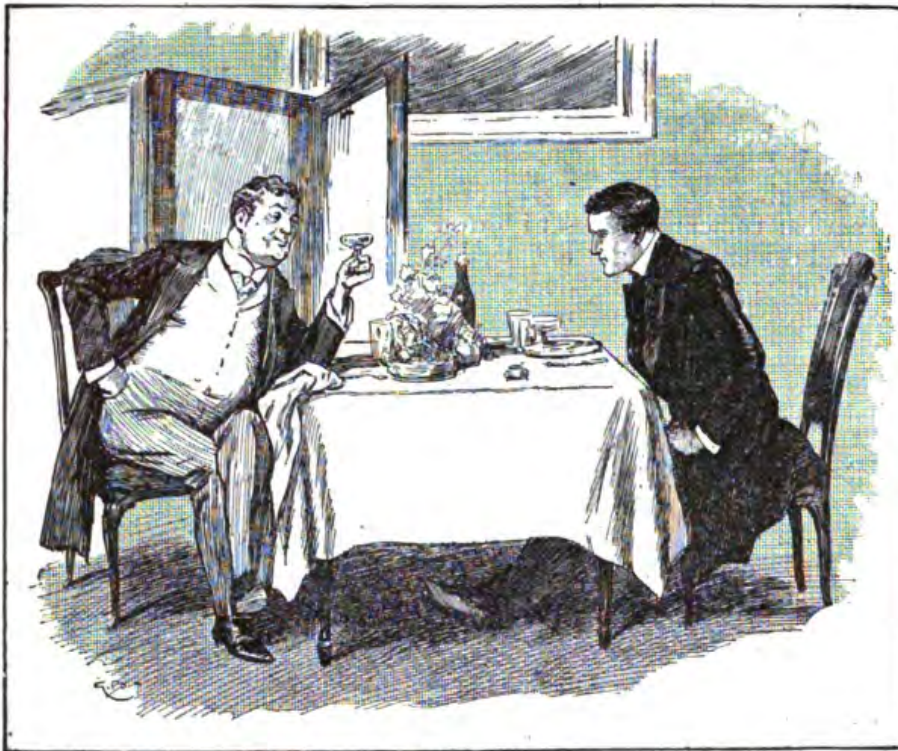
He burst into a fresh roar of delight.

"There's no harm in your knowing that much," he said. "But what's up? You look queer."

The change in my demeanour must have astonished him. I sat almost motionless, staring into his face.

"Nothing," I answered, speaking as quietly as I could. "The admiration you have remarked upon is reciprocal. I am glad that she has done so well."

"She is particularly pleased," continued Pollak, "on account of her young *protégée*, the lovely Donna Marta. The young lady in question is to make a very good match—



"AH! THERE ARE FEW WOMEN SO KIND, SO GREAT, AS MADAME SARA."

in a certain sense a brilliant one; and Madame wants to give her a wedding portion. Ah! there are few women so kind, so great, as Madame Sara. She has the wisdom of the ancients and some of their secrets, too."

I made no reply. The usual thing had happened so far as my good-natured friend was concerned. He was dazzled by the beauty of his client, and had given himself away, a ready victim to her fascinations.

"I see," he added, "that you also are under her spells. Who wouldn't yield to the power of those eyes? The young lady, Donna Marta, is all very well, but give me Madame herself."

With these words he left me. Never was there a more prosperous or happier-looking man. Little did he guess the thoughts that were surging through my brain.

Without returning to my place of business I took a hansom and drove to Vandeleur's office. My heart was full of a nameless fear. Pollak had let out a great deal more than he had any intention of doing. So Donna Marta was engaged. Engaged to whom? Surely not to the poor, infatuated young Professor? Pollak had said that in some respects the proposed match was a brilliant one. That might be a fitting description of a marriage with the young Professor, whose fame was attracting the attention of the

greatest scientists in Europe. He was poor, certainly—but then he held a secret. That secret might mean anything—it might even revolutionize the world. Did Madame mean by this subtle trap to lure it from him? It was more than probable. It would explain Pollak's excitement and his attitude. In fact, the scheme was worthy of her colossal brain.

As I entered Vandeleur's room I was surprised to see him pacing up and down with his coat off, his brows knitted in anxious

thought. He was evidently in the thick of a problem, and one of no ordinary magnitude. On the table lay a number of beakers, retorts, and test-tubes.

"Sit down," he said, roughly. "Glad you've come. See this?"

He held up a glass tube containing what appeared to be milk.

"Listen," he said. "You will see that my fears were justified with regard to Piozzi. Poor fellow, he is in the toils, if ever a man was. A hurried messenger came from his place to fetch me this morning. I guessed by his face that something serious had happened, and I went to Duke Street at once. I found the Professor in his bedroom, half dressed on his bed, cold, gasping, livid. He had breakfasted half an hour before. He murmured apologies for his treatment of me, but I cut him short and went straight to the case. I made a full investigation, and came to the conclusion that it is a case of poisoning, the agent used being in all probability cocaine, or some allied alkaloid. By the aid of nitrate of amyl capsules I pulled him round, but was literally only just in time. When I entered the room it was touch and go with the poor fellow. I believe if he had not had immediate assistance he would have been dead in a few minutes. I saved his life. Now, Druce, we have to face a fact. There has been a deliberate attempt

at murder on the part of someone. I have baffled the murderer in the moment of victory."

"Who would attempt his life?" I cried.

"Need you ask?" he answered, gravely.

Our eyes met. We were both silent.

"When I was with him this morning he was too bad for me to get any particulars whatever from him, so I know nothing of the motive or details; but I have discovered by means of a careful analysis that there has been introduced into the milk with which he was supplied some poisonous alkaloid of the erythroxyton group. Feeling pretty certain that the poison was conveyed through the food, I took away a portion of his breakfast—in particular I took some of the milk which stood in a jug on his breakfast-table. And here I have the result. I am going back there at once, and you had better come along."

Vandeleur had poured out his words in such a torrent of excitement that he had not noticed how unusual it was for me to visit him at this early hour in the afternoon. Now, however, it seemed to strike him, and he said, abruptly:—

"You look strange yourself. Surely you haven't come here on purpose? You can't possibly have heard of this thing yet?"

"No," I answered. "I have heard nothing. I have come on my own account, and on a pretty big matter too, and, what is more, it relates to our young Professor, unless I am much mistaken. I will tell you what I have to tell in the cab, Vandeleur; it will save time."

A hansom was summoned, and we were soon on our way to Duke Street. As we drove I told Vandeleur in a few words what had occurred between Pollak and myself. He listened with the intention which always characterized him. He made not a single remark.

As we were entering the house, however, he turned to me and said, with brevity:—

"It is clear that she has

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tapped him. We must get from him what she knows. This may be a matter of millions."

On arriving at Piozzi's flat in Duke Street we were at once shown into his bedroom by his man-servant. Stretched upon the outside of the bed was the young Professor, wrapped in a loose dressing-gown. His face was ghastly pale, and there was a blue tinge observable round his mouth and under his eyes. He raised himself languidly as we entered.

"Better, I see. Capital!" said Vandeleur, in a cheerful tone.

A very slight colour came into the young man's face. He glanced at me almost in bewilderment.

"You know my friend Druce," said Vandeleur. "He is with me in this case, and has just brought me important information Lie down again, Professor."

As he spoke he sat on the edge of the bed and laid his hand on the young man's arm.

"I am sorry to have to tell you, Mr. Piozzi, that this is a very serious case. A rapid qualitative analysis of what you took for breakfast has shown me that the milk which was supplied for your use has been poisoned. What the poison is I cannot say. It is very like cocaine in its reactions."

The sick man shuddered, and an expression of horror and amazement crossed his face.

"Who would want to take my life?" he said. "Poisoned milk! I confess I do not understand. The thing must have been accidental," he continued, feverishly, fixing his puzzled eyes on Vandeleur.

Vandeleur shook his head.



"WHO WOULD WANT TO TAKE MY LIFE? HE SAID."

"There was no accident in this matter," he said, with emphasis. "It was design. Deadly, too. You would not have been alive now if I had not come to you in the nick of time. It is our duty, Professor, to go carefully into every circumstance in order to insure you against a further attempt on your life."

"But I do no one harm," he answered, irritably. "Who could wish to take my life from me? It is impossible. You are labouring under a wrong impression."

"We will let the motive rest for the present," replied Vandeleur. "That the attempt was made is certain. Our present object is to discover how the poison got into the milk. That is the question that must be answered, and before Druce and I leave this room. Who supplies you with milk, Professor Piozzi?"

Piozzi replied by a languid motion towards the bell.

"My man will tell you," he said. "I know nothing about the matter."

The servant was summoned, and his information was brief and to the point. The Professor's milk was served by the same milkman who supplied all the other members of the mansion.

"It is brought early in the morning, sir," said the man, "and left outside the door of each flat. The housekeeper opens the house door for the purpose. I take it in myself the first thing on rising."

"And the can remains outside your door with the house door open until you take it in?" said Vandeleur.

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Thank you," said Vandeleur. "That will do."

The man left the room.

"You see, Professor," remarked my friend, after the door had closed upon the servant, "how simple the matter is. Anyone could drop poison into the milk—that is, of course, what somebody did. These modern arrangements don't take crime into account when the criminal means business."

The Professor lay still, evidently thinking deeply. I noticed then, for the first time, that a look of age had crept over his face. It improved him, giving stability and power to features too juvenile for the mass of knowledge which that keen brain contained. His eyes were full of trouble; it was evident that his meditations were the reverse of satisfactory.

"I am the last man to pretend not to see when a self-evident fact stares me in the face," he said, at last. "There has been an attempt

made to poison me. But by whom? Can you tell me that, Mr. Vandeleur?"

"I could give a very shrewd guess," replied Vandeleur; "but were I to name my suspicions you would be offended."

"Forgive me for my exhibition of rage the other night," he answered, quite humbly. "Speak your mind—I shall respect you whatever you say."

"In my mind's eye," said Vandeleur, slowly, "I see a woman who has before attempted the life of those whom she was pleased to call her friends."

The Professor started to his feet. Notwithstanding his vehement assertion that he would not give way to his emotions, he was trembling all over.

"You cannot mean Madame Sara—you will change your mind—I have something to confide. Between now and last Wednesday I have been affianced to Donna Marta. Yes, we are to marry, and soon. Madame is beside herself with bliss, and Donna Marta herself— Ah, I have no words to speak what my feelings are with regard to her. Madame of all people would be the last to murder me," he added, wildly, "for she loves Donna Marta."

"I am deeply sorry, Professor, notwithstanding your words and the very important statement you have just made with regard to the young lady who lives with Madame Sara, to have to adhere to my opinion that there is a very deep-laid plot on foot, and that it menaces your life. I still believe that Madame, notwithstanding your word, is head and centre of that plot. Take my statement for what it is worth. It is, I can assure you, the only thing that I can say. And now I must ask you a few questions, and you must have patience with me, great patience, while you reply to them. I beg of you to tell me the truth absolutely and frankly."

"I will," answered the young man. "You move me strangely. I cannot help believing in you, although I hate myself for allowing even one suspicious thought to fall on her."

Vandeleur rose.

"Tell me, Mr. Piozzi," he said, quietly, "have you ever communicated to Madame Sara the nature of your chemical discoveries?"

"Never."

"Has she ever been here?"

"Oh, yes, many times. Last week she and Donna Marta were both here. I had a little reception for them. We enjoyed ourselves; she was delightful."

"You have several rooms in this flat, have you not, Professor?"

"Three reception-rooms," he answered, rather wearily.

"And you and Donna Marta were perhaps alone in one of those rooms while Madame Sara amused herself in another? Is that so?"

"It is," he answered, reddening. "Madame and Donna Marta remained after my other guests had gone. Madame went into my study. She said she would sit by the fire and rest."

"Do you leave your notes locked up or lying about?"

"Always locked up. It is true the notes for my coming lecture were on that occasion on my desk."

"Ah!" interrupted Vandeleur.

"No ordinary person could make anything of them," he continued; "and even," he added, "if Madame could have read them, it surely would not greatly matter that she should know my grand secret before the rest of the world."

"Piozzi," said Vandeleur, very gravely, "I must make another request of you. Whether Madame knows your secret or not I must know it, and at once. Don't hesitate, Professor; your life hangs in the balance. You must tell me that with which you mean to electrify the Royal Institution to-morrow week, now, now at once."

The Professor looked astonished, but Vandeleur was firm.

"I must know it," he said. "I hold myself responsible for your life. Druce," he added, turning to me, "perhaps you can get the Professor to see the necessity of what I

ask. Will you tell him that story which you related to me in the cab?"

I did so without a moment's delay. My words were as brief as I could make them. I told him about my interview with Pollak, his excitement, his revelation of the fact that the patentee whose patent was to be secured in all countries all over the world was no less a person than Madame Sara herself. In short, to my infinite delight I managed to convey my suspicions to his mind. His whole attitude altered; he became excited, almost beside himself. His nervousness gave place to unexpected strength. He started to his feet and began to pace the room.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed more than once. "If indeed I have been befooled—made a dupe of—but no, it cannot be. Still, if it is, I will revenge myself on Madame to the last drop of my blood."

"For the present you must only confide in me," said Vandeleur, laying a restraining hand on the young man's arm. "And now for your secret—it is safe with Druce and myself; we must know it."

Piozzi calmed down as suddenly as he had given way to rage. He seated himself on a sofa and began in a quiet voice: "What I have to say is simply this."

Then in terse language he

poured out for Vandeleur's benefit an account of some process, interlarded with formulæ, equations, and symbols, absolutely beyond my comprehension.

Vandeleur sat and listened intently. Now and then he put a question, which was imme-



"I WILL REVENGE MYSELF ON MADAME TO THE LAST DROP OF MY BLOOD."

diately answered. At last Piozzi had come to the end of his narrative.

"That is it," he said; "the whole thing in a nutshell."

"Upon my word," said Vandeleur, "it is very ingenious and plausible, and may turn out of immense benefit to the world; but at the present juncture I cannot see money in it, and money is what Madame wants and means to have. To be frank with you, Professor, I see no earthly reason in her wanting to patent what you have just told me. But is there nothing else? Are you certain?"

"Absolutely nothing," was his response.

"Well," said Vandeleur, "I am puzzled. I own it. I must think matters over."

He was interrupted by a loud exclamation from the young man.

"You are wrong after all, Mr. Vandeleur," he cried. "Madame means to patent something else. Why should she not have a great idea in her head quite apart from me and mine? Ah, this relieves me—it makes me happy. True, someone has tried to murder me, but it is not Madame—it is not the lady whom Donna Marta loves."

His eyes blazed with delight. He laughed in feverish excitement.

After soothing him as best we could, and trying to get a half-promise that he would not see either Madame or the young lady until we met again, we left him.

As we were walking from the house Vandeleur turned to me and said:—

"I have been invited to a reception to-night at the house of our mutual friends the Lauderdales. I understand that both Madame and the young lady are to be present. Would you like to come with me? I am allowed to bring a friend."

I eagerly assented. We arranged when and where to meet, and were about to part when he suddenly exclaimed:—

"This is a difficult problem. I shall have no rest until I have solved it. Piozzi's discovery is ingenious and clever, but at present it is unworkable. I do not see daylight, but no loophole is to be despised that may give me what I want. Between now and our meeting this evening I will try to have an interview with Pollak. Give me his address."

I did so, and we parted.

We met again at a late hour that evening at the Lauderdales' beautiful house in Portland Place. Wit and beauty were to be found in the gay throng, also wisdom, and a fair sprinkling of some of the most brilliant brains in London. Men of note came face to face with one in every direction; but both

Vandeleur and I were seeking one face, and one alone.

We found her at last, surrounded by a throng of admirers. Madame was looking her most brilliant and, I might add, her youngest self. She was dressed in dazzling white and silver, and whenever she moved light seemed to be reflected at every point. The brilliance of her golden hair was the only distinct colour about her. By her side stood Donna Marta, a tall, pale girl, almost too slender for absolute beauty. Her grace, however, was undeniable, and, although I have seen more lovely faces, this one had a singular power of attraction. When I looked at her once I wanted to look again, and when she slowly raised her luminous eyes and fixed them on my face I owned to a thrill of distinct gratification. I began to understand the possibility of Piozzi's giving himself up absolutely to her charms.

Her presence here to-night, in conjunction with Madame Sara, produced an effect which was as astonishing as it was rare. Each acted as a perfect foil to the other, each seemed to bring out the rare fascination of her companion.

Donna Marta glanced at me again; then I saw her bend towards Madame Sara and whisper something in her ear. A moment later, to my amazement, the great lady and the slender girl were by my side.

"Mr. Druce, this is an unexpected pleasure. May I introduce you to my young cousin, Donna Marta? Is your friend, Mr. Vandeleur, also here to-night?"

"He is; I will find him," I replied.

I darted away, returning in a moment with Vandeleur. He and Madame moved a few paces away and began to chat in pleasant tones, just as though they were the best friends in the world.

Meanwhile Donna Marta lingered near me. I began to talk on indifferent subjects, but she interrupted me abruptly.

"You are a friend of Professor Piozzi's?" she said, in a tentative voice. "Is he not present to-night?"

"No," I replied. It occurred to me that I would test her. "The Professor cannot be present, and I am sorry to have to give a grave reason for his absence, for doubtless Lady Lauderdale expected him to grace her reception."

"She did; he was to be one of the lions," she replied, bending her stately head, with its mass of blue-black hair.

"He is ill," I continued, raising my own eyes now and fixing them on her face.

She gazed at me without alarm and without confusion. Not the most remote emotion did she show, and yet she was engaged to the man.

"He was at death's door," I went on, almost savagely, "but he is better. For the present he is safe."

"I am sorry to hear of his illness," she answered then, softly. "I will — acquaint Madame. She also will be grieved."

The girl turned and glided away from me. I watched her as she went. The brief moment when she fascinated me had come to an end with that callous glance. But who was she? What did it all mean?

In the course of the evening Donna Marta again came up to my side.

"Mr. Druce," she said, abruptly, "you are Professor Piozzi's friend?"

"Certainly," I answered.

"Will you warn him from yourself — not from me — not on any account from me — to keep in the open on Saturday week? You must make the best of my words, for I cannot explain them. Tell the Professor, whatever he does, *to keep in the open.*"

"Donna Marta!" called Madame Sara's voice.

The girl sprang away. Her face was like death; but as Madame Sara's eyes met hers I noticed a wave of crimson dye her face and neck.

On my way home I told Vandeleur of the strange words used by Donna Marta. He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is my firm opinion," he said, "that the

unfortunate girl moves and speaks in a state of trance. Madame has mesmerized her, I have not a doubt of it."

"You may be right," I said, eagerly. "And the state of trance may have been removed when she said those words to me. That would make a possible solution. But what can she mean by asking the Professor to keep in the open?"

"The girl evidently warns us against

Madame Sara," he said, briefly, "and circumstances, all circumstances, seem to point to the same deadly danger. Where Madame goes Death walks abroad. What is to be done? But there, Druce," he added, with petulance, "the Professor's life is not my affair. I must sleep, or I shall lose my senses. Good-night, good-night."

The next few days passed without any special occurrence of interest. I neither saw nor heard anything of Madame and her strange young guest, neither did I hear of the Professor nor did I see Vandeleur.

I called on him once, but he was out, and the servant informed me that his master was particularly busy, and in consequence was hardly ever at home.

At last the day dawned which was to see Professor Piozzi in the moment of his glory. I had a line from Vandeleur by the first post, telling me that he had secured tickets for himself and for me for the lecture at the Royal Institution that night. Soon afterwards I found myself at Vandeleur's house. His servant opened the door, and with a look of



"'I AM SORRY TO HEAR OF HIS ILLNESS,' SHE ANSWERED."

relief asked me to go up to the sitting-room without delay. I was expected, then, or at least I was wished for.

The first person I saw when I entered the room was my old friend Samuel Pollak, and gazing round in some amazement I also perceived the young Professor, buried in the depths of an arm-chair, his face ghastly and his arm in a sling.

"Ah, Druce," said Vandeleur, "you are heartily welcome. You have come in the nick of time. I was just about to clear up this extraordinary affair in the presence of Mr. Pollak and the Professor. Your advent on the scene makes my audience complete. Now, gentlemen, pray listen. The patent, Mr. Pollak, which you are negotiating for Madame Sara is, as you imagine, a secret. I don't ask you to tell me what it is, for I propose to tell you. But, first, are your operations for securing patent rights complete?"

from Pollak, telling us that Vandeleur's guess was correct.

"The other day when you spoke to me, Professor," continued Vandeleur, fixing his eyes on the face of the younger man, "interesting as I thought your discovery, I could not apply it to commercial purposes, nor see why it was so necessary to secure patent rights for its protection. I felt certain, however, that there was such a solution, and it came to me in the small hours this morning. You did not grasp the deduction from your most interesting discovery. I take it to my credit that I have done so, and beyond doubt Madame, whether she be your friend or your foe, perceived the huge financial benefit which would accrue to those who could hold patent rights. It goes without saying that she read your notes, and at a glance saw what you have not grasped at all, and what I



"ARE YOUR OPERATIONS FOR SECURING PATENT RIGHTS COMPLETE?"

"I regret to say they are not, sir," replied Pollak.

"I thought as much, and may add that I hoped as much. Now, listen. The key to the specification of the patents is nothing more or less than the astounding discovery of the *chemical synthesis of albuminoids*. In other words, a means of manufacturing artificial foods in a manner which has long been sought by scientific men, but which has so far eluded their researches."

An exclamation of astonishment broke

have taken days to discover. The attempt on your life is now explained, as is also the queer cab accident in Regent Street which you have just met with. Madame's object is either to murder you or to incapacitate you from giving your lecture to-night. She knows, of course, that when once you publicly proclaim your discovery a clever brain on the watch may deduce the financial value of it. Thus she sees the possibility of being forestalled or rivalled, for Mr. Pollak has just stated that the patent rights are not yet secured. Madame has

therefore determined that your lecture shall not take place, nor your idea be given to the world, until she has secured herself by patent rights beyond dispute. I shall take care to guard you, Professor, until you appear before the Royal Society at eight o'clock to-night. And I conclude, Mr. Pollak, that you, knowing at last the true facts of the case, will at once cancel all negotiations with Madame Sara. I presume, sir," he added, bowing to Piozzi, "that you will like him to negotiate the business in your name? A cursory inspection of it must mean an enormous fortune for you, for beyond doubt the chemical synthesis of aliments would prove the solution of many of the difficulties that now present themselves to the human race."

The Professor sat quite silent for a minute or two, then he rose and said, slowly :—

"I follow you, Mr. Vandeleur, and I see that your deduction is the right one as regards the financial importance of my discovery. How I did not see it sooner myself puzzles me. As to Madame Sara, I would rather not mention her name at present."

Vandeleur made no reply to this, and a moment later Pollak took his leave. I rose also to go.

"Come back and dine with us, Druce," said Vandeleur. "If Professor Piozzi declines to talk of Madame Sara, neither will I mention her name. We shall soon know the best or the worst."

The rest of the day passed without adventure. The dinner at Vandeleur's turned out somewhat dull. We were none of us in good spirits, and, without owning it, we were all anxious. As to the Professor, he scarcely spoke a word and hardly touched his food.

About ten minutes to eight o'clock we found ourselves at the Royal Institution. Several leading scientists were there to welcome the distinguished lecturer. I peeped from behind into the hall. It was packed from front to back. The platform was tastefully decorated with palms; one of peculiar grace and size drooped its finger-like fronds over the table at which Piozzi was to stand. As I saw it I heard as distinctly as though the words were again being spoken :—

"Tell him whatever he does to keep in the open. Tell him—from yourself."

I had not done so. A momentary impulse seized me. I would go to Piozzi and ask him to have his table and chair moved to the centre of the platform. Then I reflected that such a proceeding would cause amazement, and that the Professor would probably refuse to comply. Again I looked into the

hall, and now I gave a very visible start; for in the front row, in brilliant evening dress, sat Madame Sara and her young cousin. Donna Marta's face, usually so pale, was now relieved by a crimson glow on each cheek. This unusual colour brought out her beauty to a dazzling degree. I noticed further that her eyes had a filmy expression in them. I remembered Vandeleur's words. Beyond doubt Madame had mesmerized her victim. As to what it all meant, I will own that my brain was in a whirl.

A few minutes passed, and then, amid a thunder of applause, Piozzi, pale as ivory, stepped on to the platform and walked straight to the table over which hung the graceful palm.

After a few words in which the young Professor was introduced by the President of the evening, the lecture about which so much curiosity had been felt began. Vandeleur and I stood side by side near one of the entrance doors. From where we stood we could see Piozzi well. Vandeleur's face was rigid as steel.

A quarter of an hour passed, and sentence by sentence, word by word, the young man led up to his crucial point—his great announcement.

"Look!" whispered Vandeleur, grasping my wrist. "What in the world is the matter with him?"

The Professor was still speaking, but his words came in thick and indistinct sentences. Suddenly he took hold of the table with both hands and began to sway to and fro. The next moment he ceased speaking, reeled, made a lunge forward, and, with a loud crash, fell senseless upon the floor. The scene of consternation was indescribable. Vandeleur and I both sprang forward. The unconscious man was taken into one of the ante-rooms, and by the immediate application of restoratives and a great draught of fresh air, caused by the open windows, he came gradually to himself. But that he was still very ill was evident; his brain was confused; he could scarcely speak except in gasps. A doctor who was present offered to see him to his house. We carried him to the first cab we could find. I whispered in his ear that I would call upon him later in the evening, and then I returned to the hall.

Vandeleur was waiting for me. I felt his grip on my arm.

"Come right up on to the platform," he said.

The excitement in his voice was only exceeded by the look on his face. Most



"HE REELED AND MADE A LUNGE FORWARD."

of the crowd had dispersed, knowing well that there would be no further lecture that night, but a few people still lingered on the scene. I looked in vain for Madame Sara and Donna Marta; they were neither of them visible.

"You see this," said Vandeleur, pointing to the great palm that towered over the table at which Piozzi had stood. "And you see this," he repeated, seizing one of the branches and shaking it.

The long, tapering, green leaves rattled together with an odd metallic sound.

"Look here!" said Vandeleur, and he pointed to the fine tips of one of the leaves. "This plant never grew. It is made—it is an artificial imitation of the most surprising skill and workmanship. The pot in which it stands has certainly earth at the top"—he swept away a handful—"but there below is a receptacle which is generating carbon monoxide gas."

He bent and broke one of the branches.

"Hollow, you see. Those are the tubes to convey the gas to the leaves, at the extremity of each of which is an orifice. Professor Piozzi was standing beneath a veritable shower-bath of that gas, which is odourless and colourless, and brings insensibility and death. It overwhelmed him, as you saw, and it was impossible for him to finish his lecture. Only one human being could

have planned and executed such a contrivance. If we can trace it to her, she spends the night in Bow Street."

Our movements were rapid. The plant was taken to Vandeleur's house. The florist who had supplied the decorations was interviewed. He expressed himself astounded. He denied all complicity—the palm was certainly none of his; he could not tell how it had got into the hall. He had come himself to see if the decorations were carried out according to his directions, and had noticed the palm and remarked on its grace. Someone had said that a lady had brought it, but he really knew nothing definite about it.

Notwithstanding all our inquiries, neither did we ever find out how that palm got mixed up with the others.

We learnt afterwards that Donna Marta left London for the Continent that very night. What her subsequent movements were we could never ascertain. Doubtless, having acted her part in the brief rôle assigned to her, Madame would drop her from her life as she did most of her other victims.

There was, however, one satisfaction—the plot, on which so much hung, had failed. Madame was not successful. Professor Piozzi, his eyes opened at last with regard to this woman, took out his patent without an hour's unnecessary delay.