

The Sorceress of the Strand.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

V.—THE BLOODSTONE.



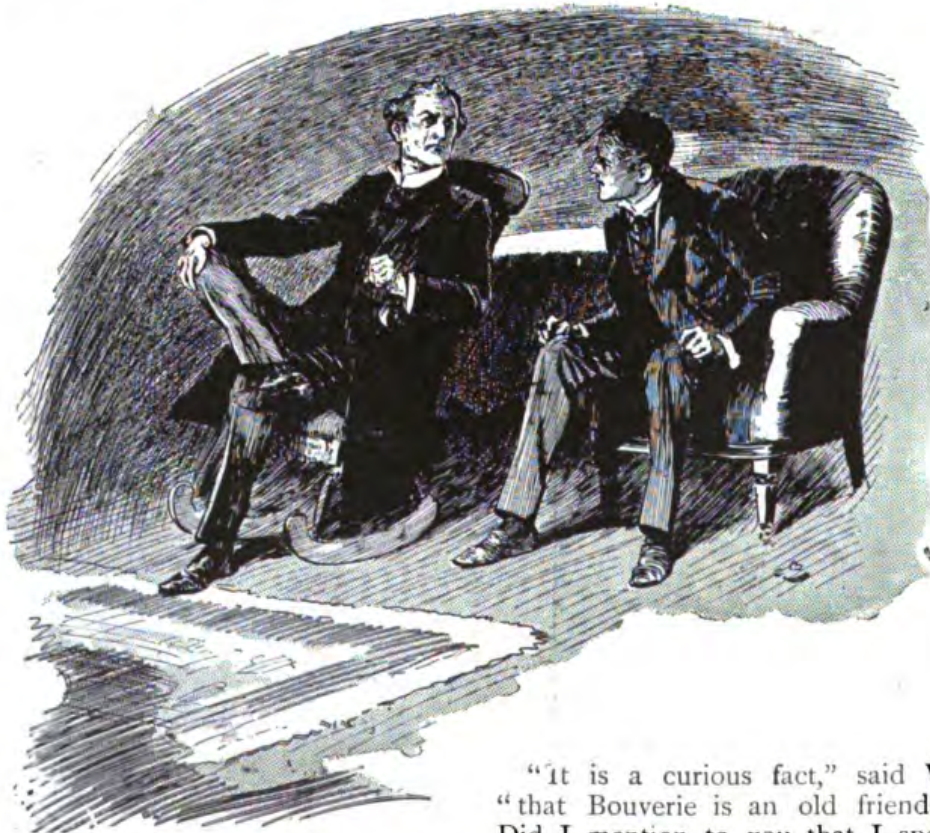
ON a certain bright spring morning Violet Sale married Sir John Bouverie, and six months later, when autumn was fast developing into a somewhat rigorous winter, I received an invitation to spend a week or fortnight at their beautiful place, Greylands, in the neighbourhood of Potter's Bar. Violet at the time of her marriage was only nineteen years of age. She and her brother Hubert were my special friends. They were by

of quite a large property were in a somewhat exceptional position. Hubert was remarkably handsome, and Violet had the freshness and charm of a true English girl.

On the evening before my visit to Greylands Vandeleur came to see me. He looked restless and ill at ease.

"So you are going to spend a fortnight at the Bouveries?" he said.

"Yes," I replied. "I look forward with great pleasure to the visit, Violet being such an old friend of mine."



"IT IS A CURIOUS FACT," SAID VANDELEUR, "THAT BOUVERIE IS AN OLD FRIEND OF MINE."

many years my juniors, but their mother at her death had asked me to show them friendship and to advise them in any troubles that might arise in the circumstances of their lives. They were both charming young people, and having been left complete control

"It is a curious fact," said Vandeleur, "that Bouverie is an old friend of mine. Did I mention to you that I spent a week with them both in Scotland two months ago? I had then the privilege of prescribing for Lady Bouverie."

"Indeed!" I answered, in some amazement. "I did not know that you gave your medical services except to your own division of police."

He laughed.

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"My dear fellow, what is a doctor worth if he doesn't on all occasions and under every circumstance practise when required the healing art? Lady Bouverie was in a very low condition, her nerves out of order—in fact, I never saw anyone such a complete wreck. I prescribed some heroic measures with drugs, and I am given to understand that she is slightly better. I should like you to watch her, Druce, and give me your true opinion, quite frankly."

There was something in his tone which caused me to look at him uneasily.

"Are you keeping anything back?" I asked.

"Yes and no," was his answer. "I don't understand a healthy English girl being shattered by nerves, and"—he sprang to his feet as he spoke—"she is hand and glove with Madame Sara."

"What!" I cried.

"She owns to the fact and glories in it. Madame has cast her accustomed spell over her. I warned Lady Bouverie on no account to consult her medically, and she promised. But, there, how far is a woman's word, under given circumstances, to be depended upon?"

"Violet would certainly keep her word," I answered, in a tone almost of indignation.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Your friend Violet is human," he answered. "She is losing her looks; she gets thinner and older-looking day by day. Under such circumstances any woman who holds the secrets Madame Sara does would compel another to be guided by her advice. At present Sir John has not the slightest idea that Lady Bouverie consulted me, but if you have any reason to fear that Madame is treating her we must tell him the truth at once. I have opened your eyes. You will, I am sure, do what is necessary."

He left me a few minutes later, and I sat by the fire pondering over his words.

Sir John Bouverie was a man of considerable note. He was a great deal older than his young wife, and held a high position in the Foreign Office.

I reached Greylands the next morning soon after breakfast, to find the country bathed in sunshine, the air both crisp and warm, and on the lawn the dew glistening like myriads of sparkling gems.

Sir John gave me a hearty welcome; he told me that Violet had not yet come downstairs, and then hurried me to my room to change and join the day's shooting-party.

We had excellent sport and did not reach

home again until five o'clock. Lady Bouverie and several guests were at tea in the library. Although Vandeleur had in a measure prepared me for a great change in her appearance, I was shocked and startled when I saw her. As a girl Violet Sale had been bright, upright, dark of eye, with a vivid colour and an offhand, dashing, joyous sort of manner. A perfect radiance of life seemed to emanate from her. To be in her presence was to be assured of a good time, so merry was her laugh, so contagious her high spirits. Now she looked old, almost haggard, her colour gone, her eyes tired, dull, and sunken. She was scarcely twenty yet, but had anyone spoken of her as a woman past thirty the remark would provoke no denial.

Just for a moment as our eyes met hers brightened, and a vivid, beautiful colour filled her cheeks.

"This is good!" she cried. "I am so glad you have come! It will be like old times to have a long talk with you, Dixon. Come over now to this cosy nook by the fire and let us begin at once."

She crossed the room as she spoke, and I followed her.

"All my guests have had tea, or if they have not they will help themselves," she continued. "Muriel," she added, addressing a pretty girl in a white tea-gown, who stood near, "help everyone, won't you? I am so excited at seeing my old friend, Dixon Druce, again. Now then, Dixon, let us step back a few years into the sunny past. Don't you remember—"

She plunged into old recollections, and as she did so the animation in her sweet eyes and the colour in her cheeks removed a good deal of the painful impression which her first appearance had given me. We talked, Lady Bouverie laughed, and all went well until I suddenly made an inquiry with regard to Hubert.

Now, Hubert had been the darling of Violet's early life. He was about three years her senior, and as fascinating and gay and light-hearted a young fellow as I had ever seen. Violet turned distinctly pale when I spoke of him now. She was silent for a few minutes, then she raised her eyes appealingly and said, in a clear, distinct voice:—

"Hubert is quite well, I believe. Of course, you remember that he was obliged to go to Australia on business just before my marriage, but I hear from him constantly."

"I should have thought he would have been back by now," was my answer. "What has he done with the bungalow?"

"Let it to a very special friend. She goes there for week-ends. You must have heard of her—Madame Sara."

"Oh, my dear Violet," I could not help saying, "why did Hubert let the place to her, of all people?"

"Why not?" was her answer. She started up as she spoke. "I am very fond of Madame Sara, Dixon. But do you know her? You look as though you did."

"Too well," I replied.

Her lips pouted.

"I see this is a subject on which we are not likely to agree," she answered. "I love Madame, and, for that matter, so does Hubert. I never met anyone who had such an influence over him. Sometimes I think that if she were a little younger and he a little older—but, there, of course, his devotion to her is not of that kind. She can do anything with him, however. He went to Australia entirely to please her. How strange you look! Have I said too much? But, there, I must not talk to you any more for the present. The fascination of your company has made me forget my other duties."

She left me, and I presently found myself in my own room, where, seated by the fire, I thought over matters. I did not like the aspect of affairs. The Willows let to Madame Sara; Hubert in Australia and evidently on Madame's business; could Violet's all too manifest trouble have anything to do with Hubert? Her manner by no means deceived me; she was concealing something. How ill she looked; how changed! Those forced spirits, that struggle to be animated, did not for a single moment blind me to the true fact that Violet was unhappy.

At dinner that evening I again noticed young Lady Bouverie's tired and yet excited appearance. Once her dark eyes met mine, but she looked away immediately. She was in distress. What could be wrong?

It was one of Sir John's peculiarities to sit up very late, and that night after the ladies had retired to rest we went into the billiard-room. After indulging in a couple of games I lit a fresh cigar, and, feeling the air of the room somewhat hot, stepped out on to the wide veranda, which happened to be deserted. I had taken one or two turns when I heard the rustle of a dress behind me, and, turning, saw Violet. She was wearing the long, straight, rather heavy, pearl-grey velvet dress which I had admired, and yet thought too old for her, earlier in the evening. She came up eagerly to my side. As I had bidden her good-night a long time ago, I could not help showing my astonishment.

"Don't look at me with those shocked, reproachful eyes, Dixon," she said, in a low voice. "I am lucky to catch you like this. I want to speak to you about something."

"Certainly," I replied. "Shall we go over to those chairs, or will you feel it too cold?"

"Not at all. Yes, let us go over there."



"DON'T LOOK AT ME WITH THOSE SHOCKED, REPROACHFUL EYES, DIXON," SHE SAID.

I drew forward one of the chairs at the corner of the veranda, wondering greatly what was coming.

Lady Bouverie looked up at me as I stood by her side, with some of the old, frank expression in her brown eyes.

"Dixon," she said, "I want you to help me and not to question me; whatever your private thoughts may be I want you to keep them to yourself. This is a most private and important matter, and I demand your help to get me through it satisfactorily."

"You have only to command," I replied.

As I spoke I glanced at her anxiously. The moonlight had caught her face, and I saw how deadly white she was. Her lips quivered. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She took out a tiny lace handkerchief and wiped them away. In a moment she had recovered her self-control and continued:—

"I am in great trouble just now, and the bitter part of it is that I can confide it to no one. But I want you, as an old friend, to do a little business for me. I can't manage it myself, or I would not ask you. I have not told my husband anything about it, nor do I wish him to know. It is not my duty to tell him, for the affair is my own, not his. You understand?"

"No," I answered, boldly, "I cannot understand any circumstances in which a wife could rightly have a trouble apart from her husband."

"Oh, don't be so goody-goody, Dixon," she said, with some petulance. "If you won't help me without lecturing, you are much changed from the old Dixon Druce who used to give us such jolly times when he called himself our dear old uncle at The Willows. Say at once whether you will go right on with this thing, or whether I shall get someone else to do what I require."

I thought of Madame, who would not scruple to do anything to get this girl into her power.

"Of course I will help you," I said. "We will leave out the goody part and go straight to business. What is it?"

"Now you are nice and like your own old self," she replied. "Please listen attentively. I have in my private box some rupee coupon bonds, payable to bearer. These I inherited among other securities at my mother's death. I want to realize them into cash immediately. I could not do so personally without my husband's knowledge, as I should have to correspond with, or go to see, the family broker in the City. Now, I want you to sell them for me at the best price. I know

the price is low owing to the fall in silver, but as they are bearer bonds there will be no transfer deeds to sign, and you can take them to your broker and get the money at once. Can you do this for me to-morrow? I hate asking you, but if you would do it I should be so grateful. The fact is, I must somehow have the money before to-morrow night."

"I will certainly do it," I replied. "I can run up to town to-morrow morning on the plea of urgent business, which will be quite true, and bring you back the money to-morrow afternoon."

Her words had filled me with apprehension, but it was quite impossible, after what she had just said, to attempt to gain her confidence as to the cause of her wish for a sudden supply of cash unknown to her husband. Could she want the money for Hubert? But he was in Australia.

"Is the amount a large one?" I asked.

"Not very," she answered. "I think the bonds should realize, at the present price, about two thousand six hundred pounds."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed. "That appears to me a large sum."

The amount doubled my anxiety. A sudden impulse seized me.

"We are old friends, Violet," I said, laying my hand on her arm. "You and Hubert and I once swore eternal friendship. Now, because of that old friendship, I will do what you ask, though I don't like to do it, and I would rather your husband knew about it. Since this is not to be, I mean to put to you another question, and I demand, Violet—yes, I demand—a frank answer."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Has Madame Sara anything, directly or indirectly, to do with this affair?"

She glanced at me in astonishment.

"Madame Sara? Absolutely nothing! Why should she?"

"Have you consulted her about it?"

"Well, yes, I have, of course. She is, you see, my very kindest friend."

"And you are doing this by her advice?"

"She did counsel me. She said it would be the only way out."

I was silent. My consternation was too great for me to put into words.

"Violet," I said, after a pause, "I am sorry that Madame has got possession of your dear old home; I am sorry you are friends with her; I am more than sorry you consult her, for I do not like her."

"Then you are in the minority, Dixon. All people praise Madame Sara. She makes friends wherever she goes."

"Ah," I answered, "except with the few who know her as she is. Ask Vandeleur what he thinks of her."

"I admire Mr. Vandeleur very much," said Violet, speaking slowly. "He is a clever and interesting man, but were he to abuse Madame I should hate him. I could even hate you, Dixon, when you speak as you are now doing. It is, of course, because you know Mr. Vandeleur so well. He is a police official, a sort of detective—such people look on all the world with jaundiced eyes. He would be sure to suspect any very clever woman."

"Vandeleur has told me," I said, after a pause, "that you respect and trust him sufficiently to consult him about your health."

"Yes," she answered. "I have not been feeling well. I happened to be alone with him on one occasion, and it seemed a chance not to be thrown away. He did look so clever and so—so trustworthy. He is giving me some medicines—I think I am rather better since I took them."

She gave a deep sigh and rose to her feet.

"Heigh-ho!" she said, "I had no idea it was so late. We must go in. John sits up till all hours. Good-night and a thousand thanks. I will put the parcel of bonds in your room to-morrow morning, in the top left-hand drawer of the chest. You will know where to find them before you go to town."

She pressed my hand, and I noticed that there were tears brimming in her eyes. Her whole attitude puzzled me terribly. It was

so unlike the ways of the Violet I used to know. Fearless, bold, daring was that girl. I used to wonder at times could she ever cry; could she ever feel keen anxiety about anyone? Now, only six months after marriage, I found a nervous, almost hypochondriacal, woman instead of the Violet Sale of old.

I thought much of Lady Bouverie's request during the hours of darkness; and in the morning, notwithstanding the fact that in some ways it might be considered a breach of confidence, I resolved to tell Vandeleur. Vandeleur would keep the knowledge to himself; unless, indeed, it was for Lady

Bouverie's benefit that he should disclose it. I felt certain that she was in grave danger of some sort, and, knowing Madame Sara as I did, my apprehensions flew to her as the probable cause of the trouble.

After breakfast I made an excuse and went up to town, taking the bonds with me.

Just as I was entering my broker's I observed a man leaning against the railings. He was dressed like an ordinary tramp, and had a slouch hat pushed over his eyes. Those eyes, very bright and watchful, seemed to haunt me. I did not think they looked like the eyes of

an Englishman—they were too brilliant, and also too secretive.

My broker gave me an open cheque for two thousand six hundred and forty pounds for the bonds. This I at once took to his bank and cashed in notes. As I was leaving the bank I observed the same man whom I had seen standing outside the broker's office.



"I OBSERVED A MAN LEANING AGAINST THE RAILINGS."

He did not look at me this time, but sauntered slowly by. I was conscious of a curious, irritated feeling, and had some difficulty in banishing him from my mind. That he was following me I had little doubt, and this fact redoubled my uneasiness.

I got into a cab and drove to Vandeleur's house; when I arrived there was no sign of the man, and, blaming myself for being over-suspicious, I inquired for my friend. He was out, but I was lucky enough to catch him just outside the Court. He was very busy, and could only give me a moment. I told him my news briefly. His face grew grave.

"Bad," was his laconic remark. "I told you I feared there was something going on. I wonder what Lady Bouverie is up to?"

"Nothing dishonourable," I replied, hotly. "Do you think, Vandeleur, she wants the money for her brother?"

"Hubert Sale has plenty of money of his own," was Vandeleur's retort. "Besides, you say he is in Australia—gone on Madame Sara's business. I don't like it, Druce. Believe me, Sara is at the bottom of this. You must watch for all you are worth. You must act the detective. Never mind whether you like the part or not. It is for the sake of that poor girl. She has, beyond doubt, put herself in the clutches of the most dangerous woman in London."

Vandeleur's remarks were certainly not encouraging. I returned to Greylands in low spirits. Lady Bouverie was waiting for me on the lawn; the rest of the party were out. She looked tired; the ravages of some secret grief were more than ever manifest on her face. But when I handed her the parcel of notes she gave me a look of gratitude, and without speaking hurried to her own apartments.

I was just preparing to saunter through the grounds, feeling too restless to go within, when a light hand was laid on my arm. Lady Bouverie had returned.

"I could not wait, Dixon," she cried. "I had to thank you at once. You are good, and you have done better than I dared to hope. Now I shall be quite, quite happy. This must put everything absolutely right. Oh, the relief! I was not meant for anxiety; I believe much of it would kill me."

"I am inclined to agree with you," I answered, looking at her face as I spoke.

"Ah," she answered, "you think me greatly changed?"

"I do."

"You will soon see the happy Violet of

old. You have saved me. You are going for a walk. May I accompany you?"

I assured her what pleasure it would give me, and we went together through the beautiful gardens. Her whole manner only strengthened my anxiety. Madame Sara her great and trusted friend; a large sum of money required immediately which her husband was to know nothing about; Hubert Sale at the other side of the world, engaged on Madame Sara's business; Madame in possession of the Sales' old home. Things looked black.

Sir John had asked me to remain at Greylands for a fortnight, and I resolved for Violet's sake to take full advantage of the invitation.

Our party was a gay one, and perhaps I was the only person who really noticed Violet's depression.

Meantime there was great excitement, for a large house-party was expected to arrive, the chief guest being a certain Persian, Mr. Mirza Ali Khan, one of the Shah's favourite courtiers and most trusted emissaries. This great personage had come to England to prepare for his Royal master's visit to this country, the date of which was as yet uncertain. Sir John Bouverie, by virtue of his official position at the Foreign Office, had offered to entertain him for a few days' shooting.

"I do not envy Ali Khan his billet," remarked Sir John to me on the evening before the arrival of our honoured guest. "The Shah is a particular monarch, and if everything is not in apple-pie order on his arrival there is certain to be big trouble for someone. In fact, if the smallest thing goes wrong Mirza Ali Khan is likely to lose his head when he returns to Persia. My guest of to-morrow has a very important commission to execute before the Shah's arrival. Amongst some valuable gems and stones which he is bringing to have cut and set for his monarch is, in especial, the bloodstone."

"What?" I asked.

"The bloodstone. *The* bloodstone, which has never before left Persia. It is the Shah's favourite talisman, and is supposed, among other miraculous properties, to possess the power of rendering the Royal owner invisible at will. Awful thing if he were suddenly to disappear at one of the big Court functions. But, to be serious, the stone is intensely interesting for its great age and history, having been the most treasured possession of the Persian Court for untold

centuries. Though I believe it is intrinsically worth very little, its sentimental value is enormous. Were it lost a huge reward would be offered for it. It has never been set, but is to be so now for the first time, and is to be ready for the Shah to wear on his arrival. It will be a great honour to handle and examine a stone with such a history, and Violet has asked the Persian to bring it down here as a special favour, in order that we may all see it."

"It will be most interesting," I replied. Then I added, "Surely there must be an element of risk in the way these Eastern potentates bring their priceless stones and jewels with them when they visit our Western cities, the foci of all the great professional thieves of the world?"

"Very little," he replied. "The Home Office is always specially notified, and they pass the word to Scotland Yard, so that every precaution is taken."

He rose as he spoke, and we both joined the other men in the billiard-room.

On the following day the new guests arrived. They had come by special train, and in time for tea, which was served in the central hall. Among them, of course, was the Persian, Mirza Ali Khan. He was a fine-looking man, handsome, with lustrous dark eyes and clear-cut, high-bred features. His manners were extremely polite, and he abundantly possessed all an Eastern's grace and charm. I had been exchanging a few words with him, and was turning away when, to my absolute surprise and consternation, I found myself face to face with Madame Sara.

She was standing close behind me, stirring her tea. She still wore her hat and cloak, as did all the other ladies who had just arrived.

"Ah, Mr. Druce," she cried, a brilliant smile lighting up her face and displaying her dazzling white teeth, "so we meet again. Dear me, you look surprised and — scarcely pleased to see me."

She dropped her voice.

"You have no cause to be alarmed," she continued. "I am not a ghost."

"I did not know you were to be one of Sir John's guest's to-night," I answered.

"In your opinion I ought not to be, ought I? But, you see, dear Lady Bouverie is my special friend. In spite of many professional engagements I determined to give her the pleasure of my society to-night. I wanted to spend a short time with her in her beautiful home, and still more I wished to meet once again that fascinating Persian, Mr. Khan. You won't believe me, I know, Mr.

Druce, when I tell you that I knew him well as a boy. I was at Teheran for a time many years ago, and I was a special friend of the late Shah's."

"You knew the late Shah!" I exclaimed, staring at her in undisguised amazement.

"Yes; I spent nearly a year in Persia, and can talk the language quite fluently. Ah!"

She turned away and addressed herself, evidently in his own language, to the Persian. A pleased and delighted smile spread over his dark Oriental features. He extended his hand to her, and the next moment they were exchanging a rapid conversation, much to the surprise of all. Lady



"I DO NOT ENVY ALI KHAN HIS BILLET," REMARKED SIR JOHN.

Bouverie looked on at this scene. Her eyes were bright with excitement. I noticed that she kept gazing at Madame Sara as though fascinated. Presently she turned to me.

"Is she not wonderful?" she exclaimed. "Think of her adding Persian to her many accomplishments. She is so wonderfully brilliant—she makes everything go well. There certainly is no one like her."

"No one more dangerous," I could not help whispering.

Violet shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"There never was anyone more obstinate and prejudiced than you can be when you like, Dixon," she answered. "Ah, there is

But I was destined to be quickly undeceived. About an hour later I was standing in one of the corridors when Violet Bouverie ran past me. She pulled herself up the next instant and, turning, came up to me on tip-toe. Her face was so changed that I should scarcely have recognised it.

"The worst has happened," she said, in a whisper.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Hubert—I did think I could save him. Oh, I am nearly mad."

"Madame has brought you bad tidings?"

"The worst. What am I to do? I must keep up appearances to-night. Don't take



"HEAVEN HELP ME!" SHE SOBBED.

Madame calling me. She and I mean to have a cosy hour in my boudoir before dinner."

She flew from my side, and as I stood in the hall I saw the young hostess and Madame Sara going slowly up the wide stairs side by side. I thought how well Violet looked, and began to hope that her trouble was at an end—that the money I had brought her had done what she hoped it would, and that Madame for the time was innocuous.

any notice of me; I will tell you to-morrow. But Heaven help me! Heaven help me!" she sobbed.

I watched her as she walked quickly down the corridor. Her handkerchief was pressed to her face; tears were streaming from her eyes. Hatred even stronger than I had ever before experienced filled me with regard to Madame Sara. My first impulse was to beard the lioness in her den, to demand an

interview with the woman, tell her all my suspicions, and dare her to torture Violet Bouverie any further. But reflection showed me the absurdity of this plan. I must wait and watch; ah, yes, I would watch, even as a detective, and would not leave a stone unturned to pursue this terrible woman until her wicked machinations were laid bare.

It was with a sinking heart that I dressed for dinner, but by-and-by, when I found myself at the long table, with its brilliant decorations and its distinguished guests, and glanced round the glittering board, I almost wondered if all that I had felt and all that Violet Bouverie's face had expressed were not parts of a hideous dream; for the party was so gay, the conversation so full of wit and laughter, that surely no horrible tragedy could be lingering in the background.

But as these thoughts came to me I looked again at Violet. At tea-time that evening I had noticed her improved appearance, but now she looked ghastly; her cheeks were hollow, her eyes sunken, her complexion a dull, dead white. Her evening dress revealed hollows in her neck. But it was the tired look, the suppressed anguish on her face, which filled me with apprehension. I could see how bravely she tried to be bright and gay. I also noticed that her eyes avoided mine.

Mirza Ali Khan sat on the right of Lady Bouverie—on his other side sat Madame Sara, and I occupied a chair next to hers. Between Madame and our hostess appeared to-night a most marked and painful contrast. Violet Bouverie was not twenty. Madame Sara, by her own showing, was an old woman, and yet at that moment the old looked young and the young old. Madame's face was brilliant, not a wrinkle was to be observed; her make-up was so perfect that it could not be detected even by the closest observer. Her *tout ensemble* gave her the appearance of a woman who could not be a day more than five-and-twenty. Many a man would have fallen a victim to her wit and brilliancy; but I at least was saved that—I knew her too well. I hated her for that beauty, which effected such havoc in the world.

It was easy to see that Ali Khan was fascinated by her; but at table she had the good taste to address him in English. Now and then I noticed that she looked earnestly at our hostess. After one of these glances she turned to me and said, in a low voice:—

“How ill Lady Bouverie is looking! Don't you think so?”

“Yes,” I replied, “she is. I feel anxious about her.”

“I wish she would consult me,” she replied. “I could do her good. But she will not. She is under the impression, Mr. Druce, that I am a quack because I do not hold diplomas—a curious delusion I find among people.”

“But a sound one,” I answered.

She laughed, and turned again to her other neighbour.

When we joined the ladies after dinner Lady Bouverie crossed over to the Persian and said something to him.

“Certainly,” he answered, and immediately left the room, returning in a few minutes with a despatch-box. We all clustered about him as he placed it on the table and opened it. A little murmur of surprise ran round the group when he lifted the lid and displayed the contents. A mass of gorgeous gems was lying in a bed of white wool. It was a blaze of all the colours of the rainbow. Emeralds, sapphires, diamonds, rubies, pearls, topazes, cats'-eyes, amethysts, and many others whose names I did not know were to be found there. One by one he removed them and passed each round for inspection. As he did so he gave a short description of its virtues, its origin, and value, and then returned it to the box again. Truly the display was wonderful. Madame Sara lingered long and lovingly over some of the gems, declaring that she had seen one or two before, mentioning certain anecdotes about them to the Persian, who nodded and smiled as he replaced, with his pointed fingers, each in its receptacle. He was evidently much pleased with the admiration they excited.

“But surely, Mr. Khan, you have brought the bloodstone to show us?” questioned Lady Bouverie.

“Ah, yes. I kept that supreme treasure for the last.”

As he spoke he pushed a spring in the box, and a secret triangular drawer came slowly out. In it, nestling in a bed of red velvet, lay a wonderful stone—a perfectly oval piece of moss-green chalcedony with translucent edges. Here and there in irregular pattern shone out in vivid contrast to the dark green a number of blood-red spots, from which the stone derived its name.

“Yes,” he said, lifting it out with reverence and laying it on the palm of his hand, “this is the bloodstone. Look closely at it if you will, but I must ask none of you to touch it.”

One after another we bent down and peered into its luminous green depths, and doubtless



"LOOK CLOSELY AT IT IF YOU WILL, BUT I MUST ASK NONE OF YOU TO TOUCH IT."

shared some of the fascination that its possessor must feel for it. The stone was wonderful, and yet it was repellent. It seemed to me that there was something sinister in those blood-red spots. The thing inspired me with the same feeling that I often have when regarding some monstrous spotted orchid.

"Yes," said Lady Bouverie, "it is wonderful. Tell us something of its history, Mr. Khan."

"I cannot," he answered, "for the simple reason that no one knows its origin nor when it came into the possession of our Court. I could tell of some of its properties, but the tales would fall unbecomingly on the ears of Western civilization."

He replaced the stone in its drawer and, in spite of our pleading, declined to discuss it further.

It was late that night before I retired to rest. I was sitting with my host in the smoking-room, and we walked together down the corridor which led to my room. Most of the lights in the house were already out, and I fancied as I chatted to Bouverie that I heard a door close softly just ahead of us. The next instant, glancing down, I saw on the dark carpet a piece of paper, open, and

bearing traces of having been folded. It was obviously a note.

"Halloa!" cried Bouverie. "What is this?"

He stooped and picked it up. At a glance we both read its contents; they ran as follows:—

"Bring it to the summer-house exactly at half-past twelve; but make certain first that Dixon Druce has retired. Don't come until he has."

Bouverie's eyes met mine. I could not tell what thought flashed into their brown depths; but the rosy hue suddenly left his face, leaving it deadly white.

"Do you understand this?" he said, addressing me briefly.

"Yes and no," I replied.

"For whom was this note intended?" was his next remark.

I was silent.

"Druce," said Bouverie, "are you hiding anything from me?"

"If I were you," I said, after a moment's quick thought, "I would attend that rendezvous. It is now five-and-twenty minutes past twelve"—I glanced at my watch as I spoke—"shall we go together?"

He nodded. I rushed to my room, put

on a dark shooting-coat, and joined my host a moment later in the hall.

We slipped out through a side door which stood slightly open. Without a word we crept softly in the shadow of the bushes towards the summer-house at the farther end of the garden, which was clearly visible in the moonlight. Whatever thoughts were coursing through Bouverie's brain there was something about his attitude, a certain forceful determination, which kept him from any words. We both drew into the dark cover of the laurels and waited with what patience we could.

A moment had scarcely gone by when across the grass with a light, quick step came a woman. She was wrapped in a dark cloak. For one instant the moonlight fell on her

forward, seize the man, and demand an explanation; but whether he was stunned or not I could not say. Before, however, he made the slightest movement Lady Bouverie herself with incredible swiftness disappeared into the darkness.

"Come," I said to Bouverie.

We both rushed to the spot where his wife had stood—something white lay on the ground. I picked it up. It was her handkerchief. Bouverie snatched it from me and looked at the initials by the light of the moon. The handkerchief was sopping wet with her tears. He flung it down again as though it hurt him.

"Great heavens!" he muttered.

I picked up the handkerchief and we both returned to the house.



"A MAN WITH A MASK OVER HIS FACE APPROACHED HER."

face and my heart nearly stopped with horror. It was that of Lady Bouverie. At that instant Bouverie's hand clutched my shoulder, and he drew me farther back into the darkest part of the shadow. From where we stood we could see but not be seen. Lady Bouverie was holding a small box in one hand, in the other a handkerchief. Her eyes were streaming with tears. She had scarcely reached the summer-house before a man with a mask over his face approached her. He said a word or two in a whisper, which was only broken by Lady Bouverie's sobs. She gave him the box; he put it into his breast-pocket and vanished.

I wondered that Bouverie did not spring

We had scarcely set foot inside the hall when the sound of many voices upstairs fell on our ears. Amongst them the Persian's accents were clearly distinguishable. Terror rang in every shrill word.

"The bloodstone is gone!—the other jewels are safe, but the bloodstone, the talisman, is gone! What will become of me? My life will be the forfeit."

We both rushed upstairs. The whole thing was perfectly true. The bloodstone, the priceless talisman of the Royal House of Persia, had been stolen. The confusion was appalling, and already someone had gone to fetch the local police.

"I shall lose my life if the stone is not

recovered," cried the miserable Persian, despair and terror depicted on his face. "Who has taken it? The other gems are safe, but the secret drawer has been burst open and the bloodstone removed. Who has taken it? Sir John, what is the matter? You look strange."

"I can throw light on this mystery," said Sir John.

I looked around me. Neither Lady Bouverie nor Madame Sara was present. I felt a momentary thankfulness for this latter fact.

"I saw my wife give a package to a stranger in the garden just now," he continued. "I do not wish to conceal anything. This matter must be looked into. When the police come I shall be the first to help in the investigation. Meanwhile I am going to my wife."

He strode away. We all stood and looked at each other. Sir John's revelation was far more terrible to all except the unfortunate Persian than the loss of the bloodstone. In fact, the enormity of the one tragedy paled beside the other.

I thought for a minute. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, I would dispatch a telegram to Vandeleur without delay. There was a mystery, and only Vandeleur could clear it up. Black as appearances were against Lady Bouverie, I had no doubt that her innocence could be established. Without a word I hurried out and raced to the post-office. There I knocked up the post-master and soon dispatched three telegrams—one to Vandeleur's house, one to his club, and one to the care of the Westminster police-station. All contained the same words:—

"Come special or motor immediately. Don't delay."

I then returned to Greylands. A hush of surprise had succeeded to the first consternation. A few of the guests had reappeared, startled by the noise and confusion, but many still remained in their rooms. Sir John was with his wife. We assembled in the dining-room, and presently he came down and spoke to us.

"Lady Bouverie denies everything," he said. "She swears she has never left her room. This matter must be thoroughly investigated," he continued, going up to the Persian. "There are times when a man in all honour cannot defend even his own wife."

Meanwhile Madame Sara remained in the library. She was sitting by a table busily writing. When Sir John appeared she came

into the room and spoke to him. Her face was full of sympathy.

"Of course Violet is innocent," she said. "I cannot understand your story, Sir John."

He did not reply to her. She then offered to go up to Violet; but he peremptorily forbade her to do so.

On the arrival of the local police a formal inquiry was made. Mirza Ali Khan declared that after showing us the gems he returned the box to his room. On retiring for the night he observed that it had been moved from the position in which he had placed it. He examined it and found that the lock had been tampered with—had, indeed, been ruthlessly burst open, evidently with a blunt instrument. He then touched the spring which revealed the secret drawer—the bloodstone was gone. All the other gems were intact. Knowing that the secret of the drawer was a difficult one to discover, the Persian was convinced that the bloodstone had been stolen by one of the party who assembled round him that evening and who had seen him touch the spring.

"My host, Sir John Bouverie, tells me an incredible story," he said. "I will leave the matter in Sir John's hands, trusting absolutely to his honour."

In a few words Sir John described what he had seen. He handed the note which we had found in the corridor to the police, who examined it with interest. Lady Bouverie was sent for, and pending further investigation the unfortunate girl was placed under arrest.

Half-past one struck, then two, and it was only our earnest appeal to await Vandeleur's arrival that prevented the police from removing Lady Bouverie in custody. Would he never come? If he had started at once on receipt of the wire he would be nearly at Greylands now.

Suddenly I heard a sound and ran breathlessly to the front door, which was open. Stepping from a motor-car, hatless but with the utmost calm, was Vandeleur. I seized his hand.

"Thank Heaven you are here!" I exclaimed. "You must have raced."

"Yes, I shall be summoned to-morrow for fast driving, and I have lost my hat. What's up?"

I hurried him into the dining-room, where a crowd of guests was assembled. It was a wonderful scene, and I shall never forget it. The anxious faces of the visitors; Lady Bouverie standing between two constables, sobbing bitterly; her husband just behind

her, his head turned with shame and misery ; and then, as though in contrast, the tall, commanding figure of Vandeleur, with his strong features set as though in marble. He was taking in everything, judging in his acute mind the evidence which was poured out to him.

"Have you anything to say?" asked Vandeleur, gently, to Lady Bouverie. "Any explanation to offer?"

"I was not there," was her answer. "I never left my room."

Sir John muttered something under his breath ; then he turned brusquely and requested the visitors to leave the room. They did so without a word, even Madame Sara taking herself off, though I could see that she went unwillingly. Sir John, Vandeleur, myself, the Persian, the two constables, and Lady Bouverie were now alone.

Vandeleur's expression suddenly changed. He was regarding Lady Bouverie with a steady look ; he then took up the handkerchief which we had found, examined it carefully, and laid it down again.

"Have you been taking the medicine I ordered you, Lady Bouverie?" was his remark.

"I have," she replied.

"To-day?"

"Yes ; three times."

"Will someone give me a large, clean sheet of white paper?"

I found one at once and brought it to him. He carefully rolled the handkerchief in it, drew out his stylograph, and wrote on the package :—

"Handkerchief found by Sir John Bouverie and Mr. Druce at 12.40 a.m."

He then asked Lady Bouverie for the one which she had in her pocket ; this was almost as wet as the one I had picked up. He put it in another packet, writing also upon the paper :—

"Handkerchief given to me by Lady Bouverie at 3.20 a.m."

Then, drawing the inspector aside, he whispered a few words to him which brought an exclamation of surprise from that officer.

"Now," he said, turning to Sir John, "I have done my business here for the present. I mean to return to London at once in my motor-car, and I shall take Mr. Druce with me. The inspector here has given me leave to take also these two handkerchiefs, on which I trust important evidence may hang."

He drew out his watch.

"It is now nearly half-past three," he said. "I shall reach my house at 4.30 ; the examination will take fifteen minutes ; the result will be dispatched from Westminster police-station to the station here by telegram. You should receive it, Sir John, by 5.30, and I trust," he added, taking Lady Bouverie's hand, "it will mean your release, for that you



"TWO MINUTES LATER WE WERE RUSHING THROUGH THE NIGHT TOWARDS LONDON."

are guilty I do not for a moment believe. In the meantime the police will remain here."

He caught my arm, and two minutes later we were rushing through the night towards London.

"My dear fellow," I gasped, "explain yourself, for Heaven's sake. Is Violet innocent?"

"Wonderful luck," was his enigmatical answer. "I fancy Sara has over-acted this piece."

"You can find the bloodstone?"

"That I cannot tell you; my business is to clear Lady Bouverie. Don't talk, or we shall be wrecked."

He did not vouchsafe another remark till we stood together in his room, but he had driven the car like a madman.

He then drew out the two packets containing the handkerchiefs and began to make rapid chemical preparations.

"Now, listen," he said. "You know I am treating Lady Bouverie. The medicine I have been giving her happens to contain large doses of iodide of potassium. You may not be aware of it, but the drug is eliminated very largely by all the mucous membranes, and the lachrymal gland, which secretes the tears, plays a prominent part in this process. The sobbing female whom you are prepared to swear on oath was Lady Bouverie at the rendezvous by the summer-house dropped a handkerchief—this one." He laid his finger on the first of the two packets. "Now, if that woman was really Lady Bouverie, by analysis of the handkerchief I shall find, by means of a delicate test, distinct traces of iodine on it. If, however, it was not Lady Bouverie, but someone disguised with the utmost skill of an actress to represent her, not only physically, but with all the emotions of a distracted and guilty woman, even to the sobs and tears—then we shall not find iodine on the analysis of this handkerchief."

My jaw dropped as the meaning of his words broke upon me.

"Before testing, I will complete my little hypothesis by suggesting that the note, evidently thrown in your way, was to decoy you to be a witness of the scene, and that the handkerchief taken from Lady Bouverie's room and marked with her initials was intended to be the finishing touch in the chain of evidence against her. Now we will come to facts, and for all our sakes let us hope that my little theory is correct."

He set to work rapidly. At the end of some operations lasting several minutes he held up a test tube containing a clear solution.

"Now," he said, opening a bottle containing an opalescent liquid; "guilty or not guilty?"

He added a few drops from the bottle to the test tube. A long, deep chuckle came from his broad chest.

"Not a trace of it," he said. "Now for the handkerchief which I took from Lady Bouverie for a check experiment."

He added a few of the same drops to another tube. A bright violet colour spread through the liquid.

"There's iodine in that, you see. Not guilty, Druce."

A shout burst from my lips.

"Hush, my dear chap!" he pleaded. "Yes, it is very pretty. I am quite proud."

Five minutes later a joyful telegram was speeding on its way to Greylands.

"So it was Sara," I said, by-and-by. "What is your next move?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is one thing to prove that a person is not guilty, but it is another thing to prove that someone else is. Of course, I will try. This is the deepest game I ever struck, and the boldest, and I think the cleverest. Poor Ali Khan, the Shah will certainly cut his head off when he gets back to Persia. Of course, Sara has taken the stone. But whether she has done so simply because she has a fancy to keep it for herself, believing in its power as a talisman, or for the reward which is certain to be offered, who can tell? The reward will be a large one, but she doesn't want money. However, we shall see. Her make-up was good, and she had all her details well worked out."

"But we have not yet found out what Violet's trouble is," I remarked. "There is, I am sure, some mystery attached to Hubert."

"I doubt it," said Vandeleur, brusquely.

He rose and yawned.

"I am tired and must lie down," he said. "You will, of course, return to Greylands later in the morning. Let me know if there are any fresh moves."

By noon that day I found myself back at Greylands. Surely this was a day of wonders, for whom should I see standing on the steps of the old house, talking earnestly to Sir John Bouverie, but my old friend, Hubert Sale. In appearance he was older than when I had last seen him, and his face was bronzed. He did not notice me, but went quickly into the house. Sir John came down the avenue to meet me.

"Ah, Druce," he said, "who would have

believed it? Of all the amazing things, your friend Vandeleur's penetration is the greatest. We both saw her with our own eyes, and yet it wasn't my wife. Come into my study," he continued; "I believe I can throw light on this most extraordinary affair. Hubert's unlooked-for return puts the whole thing into a nutshell. I have a strange tale to tell you."

"First, may I ask one question?" I interrupted. "Where is Madame Sara?"

He spread out his hands with a significant gesture.

"Gone," he said. "How, when, and where I do not know. We thought she had retired for the night. She did not appear this morning. She has vanished, leaving no address behind her."

"Just like her," I could not help saying. "Now I will listen to your story."

"I will try to put it in as few words as possible. It is a deep thing, and discloses a plot the malignity of which could scarcely be equalled.

"Violet and Hubert made the acquaintance of Madame Sara a few months before Violet's marriage. You know Madame's power of fascination. She won Violet's affections, and as to Hubert, she had such complete influence over him that he would do anything in the world she wished. We were surprised at his determination to go to Australia before his sister's wedding, but it now turns out that he was forced to go by Madame herself, who assured him that he could be of the utmost assistance to her in a special matter of business. This was explained to Violet and to me fully; but what we were not told was that he took with him Madame's own special servant, an Arabian of the name of Achmed, the cleverest man, Hubert said, he had ever met. In his absence Madame rented his house for at least a year. All this sounds innocent enough; but listen.

"Very shortly after her marriage Violet began to receive letters from Hubert, dated from various stations in Australia, demanding money. These demands were couched in such terms as to terrify the poor child. She sent him what she could from her own supplies, but he was insatiable. At last she spoke to Madame Sara. Madame immediately told her she had learnt that Hubert had made some bad companions, had got into serious scrapes, and that his debts of honour were so enormous that unless she,

Violet, helped him he could never set foot in England again. The poor girl was too much ashamed to say a word to me. These letters imploring money came by almost every mail. Madame herself offered to transmit the money, and Violet, with the utmost confidence, placed large sums in her hands.

"At last the crisis arrived. A communication reached my poor girl to the effect that unless she paid between two and three thousand pounds in notes in a couple of days Hubert in his despair would certainly take his life. She was well aware of his somewhat reckless character. Hence her request to you to sell the bonds. Shortly afterwards the Persian arrived here, and Madame, at her own request, came to spend the night. She managed to terrify Violet with a fresh story with regard to Hubert, and the child's nerves were so undermined that she believed everything.

"Well, you know the rest. You know what happened last night. But for Vandeleur's genius, where might poor Violet be now? I must tell you frankly that even I believed her guilty; I could not doubt the evidence of my own senses.

"You can judge of our amazement when Hubert walked in this morning. He looked well. He said that Madame's business was of a simple character, that he had soon put matters right for her, and after seeing what was to be seen in Australia and New Zealand came home. He was amazed when we spoke of his being in money difficulties; he had never been in any scrape at all. Only one thing he could not understand—why Violet never answered his letters. He wrote to her about every second mail, and, as a rule, gave his letters to the Arabian to post. There is no doubt that Achmed destroyed them and wrote others on his own account.

"Well, Druce, what do you say? The motive? Oh, of course, the motive was the bloodstone. The woman knew probably for months that it was coming to England, and that I, in my official position, would invite the Persian here. She wanted it, goodness knows for what, and was determined to have a long chain of evidence against poor Violet in order to cover her own theft. Druce, we must find that woman. She cannot possibly be at large any longer."

The desire to find Madame was in all our minds, but how to accomplish it was a question which I for one did not dare to answer.