

The Sorceress of the Strand.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

VI.—THE TEETH OF THE WOLF.

“**C**OUNT on your accepting,” said Vandeleur.

“But why?” I asked, with some impatience. “I have never heard anything favourable with regard to Mrs. Bensasan. Her cruelties to her animals are well known. Granted that she is the best tamer of wild animals in Europe, I would rather not know her.”

“That has nothing to do with the case in point,” replied Vandeleur. “Mrs. Bensasan and Madame Sara are working one of Madame’s worst plots. I have not the least doubt on the subject. It is my business to solve this mystery, and I want your aid.”

“Of course, if you put it in that way I can refuse no longer,” was my response. “But what do you mean?”

“Simply this.” As Vandeleur spoke he leant back in his chair and drew a long puff from his meerschaum. “I am acting in the interests of Gerald Hiliers. You have, of course, heard of the missing girl?”

“Your enigmas become more and more puzzling,” I replied. “I know but little of Gerald Hiliers. And who is the girl?”

“I have rather a pretty story to entertain you with. This is the state of things, as nearly as I can narrate it. Mrs. Bensasan, the owner of Bensasan’s Menageries, is in some ways the talk of London. She has dared to do what hardly any other woman has done before her. She runs her shows herself, being always present at important exhibitions. Her lion-taming exploits were remarkable enough to arouse general attention in Paris last year, but now in London she is going on an altered tack. She is devoting herself to the taming of even wilder and more difficult animals to manage—I mean wolves.”

“But what about the girl and your friend Hiliers?”

“I will explain. But first let me tell you about Mrs. Bensasan. I must describe her before I go any farther. She is built on a very large scale, being six feet in height. She has strong features, prominent eyes, and a ringing, harsh voice. Her mouth is remarkably large and wide. I understand that Madame Sara has supplied her with a perfect set of false teeth, so well made that they defy detection,

but altogether she is disagreeable to look at, although the very essence of strength. Now, this woman is a widow and has one only child of the name of Laura, a girl about nineteen years of age, who is in all respects as unlike the mother as daughter could be, for she is slight, fair, and gentle-looking, with a particularly attractive face. Miss Laura has had the bad taste, according to Mrs. Bensasan, to fall in love with Hiliers, whereas the mother wants her for a very different bridegroom. I have known Hiliers for years, and his father is a friend of mine. He is a nice, gentlemanly fellow, with good commercial prospects. Now, although it is more than probable that Hiliers will be a rich man, Mrs. Bensasan does not wish for the match. She wants Laura to marry a horrible, misshapen little man—a dwarf of the name of Rigby. So far as I can ascertain Rigby is half Jew, half Greek, and he has evidently known Mrs. Bensasan for many years. He lives in expensive lodgings near Cavendish Square, drives a mail phaeton, and has all the externals that belong to a rich man. His face is as repulsive as his body is misshapen. The girl cannot stand him, and what the mother sees in him is the most difficult part of the problem which I have got to solve. It may be a case of blackmail. If so, I must prove it. There is not the slightest doubt that this extremely strong and disagreeable woman fears Rigby, although she professes to be a great friend of his.

“In addition, Madame Sara is Mrs. Bensasan’s friend. She spends a great deal of her time at Cray Lodge, the pretty little place near Guildford where the Bensasans live. These two women are evidently hand in glove, and both have resolved to give the poor girl to Joseph Rigby; as things are at present Gerald Hiliers stands a poor chance of winning his bride.”

“You say the girl is missing?”

“Yes. About a month ago Gerald wrote to Mrs. Bensasan asking her for Laura’s hand. He had quite a civil letter in reply, stating that the matter required consideration, and that just at present she would rather he did not pay his addresses to her daughter. Nevertheless, he received an invitation, a few days later, to stay at Cray Lodge.

“He arrived there, was treated with marked kindness, and allowed to see Laura

as much as he liked. The poor girl seemed sadly restrained and unhappy. One day when the two found themselves alone she told him that he had better give her up, as she knew there was not the slightest chance of her being allowed to marry him; but she further added that under no circumstances would she marry Rigby. As she uttered the words Mrs. Bensasan came into the room. To all appearance she had heard nothing. Hiliers left Cray Lodge that afternoon.

"Early the next morning he received a letter from Mrs. Bensasan asking him to come to her at once. He hurried to the Lodge; he was received by his hostess, who told him that she had sent Laura from home, and that she did not intend to reveal her whereabouts until she had decided to give her as a bride to Joseph Rigby or to him. She would not say at present which suitor she most favoured; she only reserved to herself the absolute power to choose between them.

"'Laura shall only marry the man I choose her to marry,' was her final announcement, and then she added: 'In order to study your character, Mr. Hiliers, I again invite you to come here on a visit. My friend, Mr. Rigby, will also be a guest.'

"This state of things alone would have made Hiliers anxious, although not greatly alarmed; but Laura's old nurse, who had been hiding behind a laurustinus bush in the avenue, rushed up to him as he was returning to the railway-station and thrust a note into his hand. It was written by herself and was very illiterate. In this she managed to inform him that her young lady had been removed from her bed in the middle of the night and been put forcibly into a cab by Mrs. Bensasan and Madame Sara. It was

the nurse's impression that the poor girl was about to be subjected to some very cruel treatment.

"Hiliers came to me at once and implored me to help him to find and rescue Miss Bensasan. I must own that I was at first puzzled how to act. It was just then that an extraordinary thing happened. Mrs. Bensasan came to see me. Her ostensible reason was to consult me with regard to some curious robberies which had lately taken place on her premises. Her great fear was that the people who committed the burglaries would try to injure her wolves by throwing poisoned meat to them. She had heard of me and my professional skill from her great friend, Madame Sara, and, in short, she wanted to know if I would take up the matter, assuring me that I should be handsomely paid for my



"LAURA'S OLD NURSE THRUST A NOTE INTO HIS HAND."

services, and, further, that I might bring my friend, Mr. Dixon Druce, with me.

"'Madame Sara and I would like to have you both staying at Cray Lodge,' she said. 'I hope you will come. Will you, in company with your friend, Mr. Druce, visit me next Monday? We can then go carefully into the matter and you can give me your opinion. It would be a most serious thing for me, more serious than I can give you

the least idea of, if my wolves were tampered with. I ask for your presence as a great favour. Will you both come?"

"And you accepted that sort of invitation?" was my remark.

"I accepted it," replied Vandeleur, gravely, "for us both."

"But why? Your attitude in this matter puzzles me very much. I should imagine that you would not care to darken that woman's doors."

"I suspect," said Vandeleur, slowly, "that the tale of the robberies is a mere blind. I look forward to a very interesting time at Cray Lodge, for I intend to become possessed of the necessary knowledge which will enable me to give Miss Laura to Gerald Hiliers as his bride."

I greatly disliked the idea of going to stay at Cray Lodge. I thought Vandeleur on the wrong track when he entered Mrs. Bensasan's house as her guest. There was no help for it, however; he was determined to go, and I, as his special friend, would not fail him in what was extremely likely to be an hour of danger.

On the following Monday accordingly I accompanied Vandeleur to Mrs. Bensasan's house. A smart dog-cart was waiting for us at Guildford, and we drove to the Lodge, a pretty house, situated about three miles out of the town. It stood in its own grounds. There was a pine wood to the left, and I

might have thought I was approaching one of the most innocent and lovely homes of England, but for the sinister bay of a wolf that fell upon my ears as we drove up the avenue.

Tea was in full progress in the central hall when we arrived. Mrs. Bensasan wore a gown of tawny velvet, which suited her massive figure and harsh, yet in some ways handsome, face. Her hair was a shade redder in tone than the velvet, and she had it arranged in thick coils round her large head. Her dead-white complexion was unrelieved by any colour. Her reddish eyebrows were thick, and her eyes, large and the colour of agates, gleamed with approval as we entered the hall. She came forward at once to meet us.

"Welcome!" she said, in her harsh voice, and as she spoke she smiled, showing those white, regular teeth which Vandeleur had mentioned as the work of that genius, Madame Sara.

We stood for a moment or two by the fire, and as we did so I watched her face. The brow was low, the eyes very large and very brilliant, but I thought them altogether destitute of humanity. The nose was thick,

with wide nostrils, and the mouth was hideous, cut like a slit across her face. Notwithstanding her



"MY FRIEND, MR. JOSEPH RIGBY," SHE SAID.

beautiful teeth, that mouth destroyed all pretence to good looks.

In the presence of one so coarse and colossal Madame Sara, who was standing in the background, appeared at first almost insignificant, but a second glance showed that this woman was the very foil she needed to bring out her remarkable and great attractions. Her slenderness and her young figure, the softness of her blue eyes, the golden sheen of that marvellous hair, which was neither dyed nor artificially curled, but was Nature's pure product, glistening and twining itself into tendrils long, thick, and soft as a girl's, all contrasted well with the heavy appearance of her hostess. Mrs. Bensasan looked almost an old woman; Madame Sara might have been twenty-eight or thirty. She wore a black dress of cobwebby lace, and nothing could better suit the delicacy of her complexion.

I had just taken my second cup of tea when a voice at my elbow caused me to turn round quickly. Then, indeed, I could not help starting, for one of the most misshapen and altogether horrible-looking men I had ever seen stood before me. His face was all hillocks and excrescences, the forehead bulging forward, the eyes going back very deeply into their sockets; they were small eyes, and seemed ever to glisten with an uneasy and yet watchful movement. The lower part of his face was covered with a thick black moustache and short beard. The nose was small, very *retroussé*, with wide nostrils. Mrs. Bensasan introduced him with a careless nod.

"My friend, Mr. Joseph Rigby—Mr. Druce," she said.

Rigby bowed rather offensively low, and then began to talk.

"I am glad you and Mr. Vandeleur are going to give us the pleasure of your company for a day or two," he said. "Mrs. Bensasan has a very fine scheme for our amusement on Wednesday night. You have, of course, heard of Mrs. Bensasan's wolves? I doubt not she will let you see them if you ask her. She is very proud of these animals, and no wonder. Taganrog, a great Siberian he-wolf, is alone likely to make her famous. It is Mrs. Bensasan's most kind intention to give us an exhibition of her power over Taganrog on Wednesday night."

"Indeed," I answered, "that will be interesting."

Someone called him and he moved away. Tea was over, but there were still a couple of hours of daylight left.

Mrs. Bensasan stood a little apart from her other guests. She saw me and came up to my side.

"Should you be afraid if I took you to see my pets?" she said.

"I should like to go very much," I replied.

"You are certain you will not turn coward? Some people dread the special pack I am now training."

I smiled.

"I shall not be afraid," I answered.

A pleased expression crossed her face.

"Then you, Mr. Druce, shall come with me. You alone. Come at once," she added. "This way, please."

We left the house and, crossing the broad

avenue, went down a sloping path which led through the pine woods. As we walked I peered through the trees, and just before me, a few hundred yards away, I saw a cluster of low buildings or kennels such as are used to keep foxhounds in. These kennels were, however, very much stronger than those required by the master of a pack of hounds. They were



"YOU ARE CERTAIN YOU WILL NOT TURN COWARD?"

of strong brick on three sides, and in front were placed high iron railings which fenced in a sort of yard. This was further divided into compartments, one compartment for each kennel, and the whole was covered over at the top with an iron penthouse. In short, the arrangements were very much on the scale employed by the Zoological Gardens in London.

"Before I bought Cray Lodge, the late owner kept foxhounds," said Mrs. Bensasan. "I had the old kennels pulled down and built up again to suit my purpose. I have kept all sorts of wild beasts in them. My present fancy is for wolves. Taganrog, my large Siberian wolf, has proved more troublesome than any other animal I have attempted to subdue. I shall, of course, conquer him in the end, but I own that the task is difficult."

We had now reached the kennels. Mrs. Bensasan and I stood together outside the iron bars. The doors of the cages themselves were all open, and the wolves were outside in their yards: some lying down and half asleep, others moving restlessly up and down the narrow confines of their prisons. Mrs. Bensasan walked from one enclosure to the other, looking into each and telling me different stories with regard to the special wolves. At last she came to the enclosure where Taganrog was confined.

"You must watch from there," she said, pointing to a grass mound that stood a few feet away. "I am the only one who ever ventures inside those doors. Taganrog fears me, although he will not as yet submit altogether to my treatment."

As she spoke she took a great key from her girdle and unlocked the gate in the centre of the bars. When she got within she put up her hand

in the direction of the iron roof and took down a big stock whip. At the end of the fall of the whip were wires loaded with balls of lead. I now noticed that Taganrog's kennel was closed. I had not yet seen the great wolf.

"What an awful weapon!" I said, pointing to the whip.

Her ugly mouth opened wide and she showed all her glittering white teeth.

"Not more awful than my beautiful Taganrog deserves. He is the grandest creature on earth and the most untamable. But never mind; my heart is set on effecting his moral reformation."

She laughed discordantly. There seemed to be nothing in tune about the woman. Already her personality was getting on my nerves. She gave me a glance, half of contempt, half of amusement.

"Watch me from the grass bank," she said. "You will see what will appear to you an ugly sight; but remember all the time that it is the reformation of the great Siberian wolf Taganrog, and that by-and-by all England, all Europe, will ring with his exploits and mine. It is a strange thing, Mr. Druce, but that great wolf seems part of me. Once, in some primeval age, we must have been akin."

She turned, and before I could utter a word walked to the kennel. The next instant a huge grey wolf sprang into sight.



"SHE LASHED THE ANIMAL SEVERAL TIMES UNMERCIFULLY."

He was a beautiful creature, with long, very thick grey hair, a bushy tail, and a face which at first sight looked gentle as that of a Newfoundland dog. But when he saw Mrs. Bensasan a rapid change came over him. He crouched in one corner, his teeth were bared, he growled audibly, and shivered in every limb. Mrs. Bensasan stood a foot away, holding her loaded whip slightly raised. She said something to the animal. He crouched as though to spring. In another instant the whip descended smartly on his loins. The blood flowed freely from the poor beast's back. A fierce and terrible expression broke from the woman's lips, and raising the whip once again she lashed the animal several times unmercifully. I could not contain myself. I sprang forward to the doors of the cage.

"Don't be so cruel," I said; "this exhibition is too horrible."

She turned at once at the sound of my voice. I noticed that her face was deadly white and covered with perspiration.

"Don't interfere," she said, in a low tone of fierce anger.

Then, fixing her eyes on Taganrog, she raised the whip once more with a menacing attitude and pointed to the kennel. The wolf gave her a cowed look from his blood-shot eyes and slunk in, growling as he disappeared.

Going up to the kennel she shot the bolt and made it fast. Then, returning the whip to its place, she opened the iron gates, passed through, locked them, and faced me.

"When you came so near you were in danger," she said. "You did a mad thing. Taganrog was in the mood to spring at anyone. He fears me, but he would have torn you savagely even through the bars. In his moments of fear and passion, to tear anyone limb from limb would be his delight. You were foolhardy and in danger."

We were walking slowly back to the house, and had gone about twenty yards, when a cry, clear, full, and piercing, rang on the air. It was so terrible and so absolutely unexpected that I stood still and faced Mrs. Bensasan.

"That is the cry of a woman," I said. "What is wrong?"

She smiled, and stood still as though she were listening. The cry was not repeated, but the next instant the howl of many wolves in evident hunger broke on the stillness.

"What was that other cry?" I asked.

"One of the wolves, perhaps," she

answered, "or"—she shrugged her shoulders—"the ghost may really exist."

"What ghost? Please speak, Mrs. Bensasan."

Again she shrugged her shoulders.

"There is a story extant in these parts, to which, of course, I give no credence," she replied; "but the country folks say that the old vaults under the kennels are haunted. Those vaults are useless now and out of repair, but they say that a madman once lived in Cray Lodge. He kept foxhounds, and his wife died under mysterious circumstances. The story is that he shut her into the cellars and starved her. I do not know any particulars—the whole thing happened years ago—but the country folks will tell you, if you question them, that now and then her cry comes out on the midnight or evening air. I am rather pleased with the story than otherwise, for it keeps people off the vicinity of my wolves. You know, of course, why I asked you and Mr. Vandeleur here? Not only for the pleasure of your company, but in order that your exceedingly clever friend may discover if there are any people in the neighbourhood who would dare to tamper with my special pets. It would be easy to throw them poisoned meat through the iron bars of their enclosures. A woman in my profession is surrounded by enemies. Ah! how excited my wolves are to-night! Listen to Taganrog; he is expressing his feelings."

A prolonged howl, full of misery, rent the air. We both returned in silence to the house.

"You will find the hall warm and comfortable, Mr. Druce. Ah! there is Madame Sara sitting by the fire; she is always good company. Go and talk to her. You need not begin to prepare for dinner for over an hour."

She left me and I went into the hall. Madame Sara was seated near the fire. The firelight fell on the red gold of her beautiful hair and lit up the soft complexion.

I sat down beside her.

"Will you answer a question?" I said, suddenly. "Where is Miss Bensasan?"

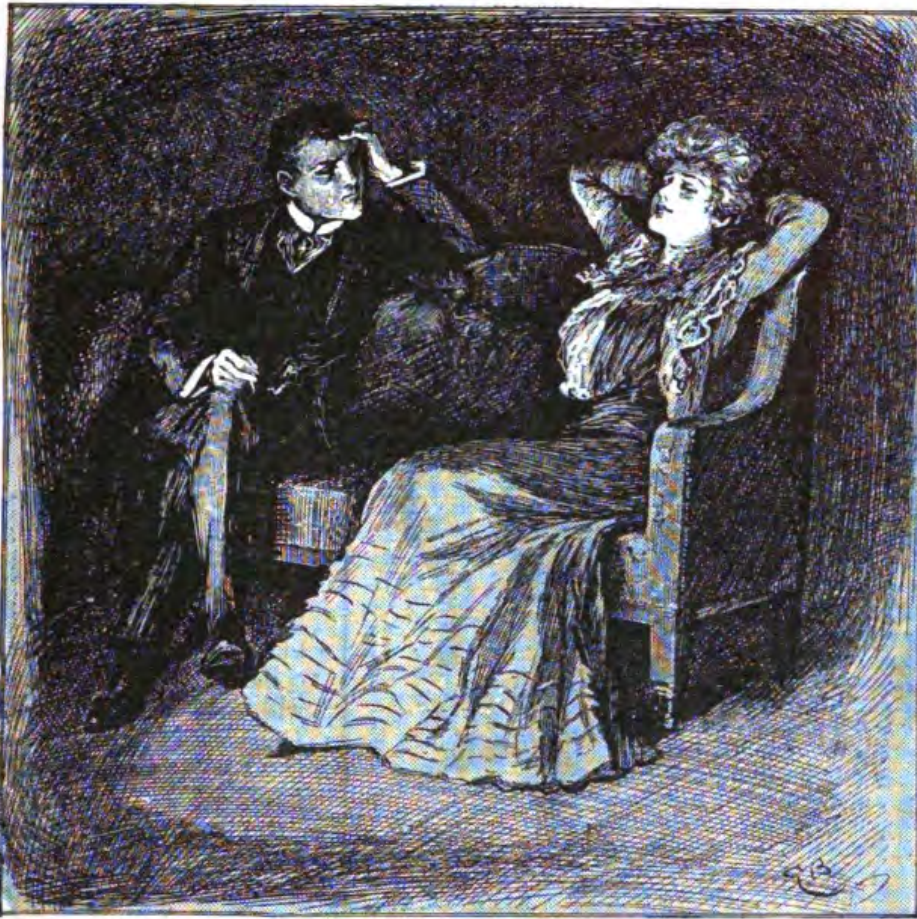
"That secret belongs to her mother."

"But you know—I am certain you know."

"The secret belongs to Mrs. Bensasan," was Madame's reply.

She sat still, gazing into the flames that licked the great logs on the hearth. I watched her. She was as great an enigma to me as ever. Suddenly she spoke in a reflective voice.

"You are, of course, aware that Mr. Hiliers is the son of a very wealthy man?"



"SHE SAT STILL, GAZING INTO THE FLAMES."

"I only know that he is a diamond merchant," I replied.

"And that," she answered, slowly, "is sufficient. I shall have something to do with the elder Mr. Hiliers before long. He has just purchased Orion, the most marvellous diamond that Africa has produced of late years."

"I was not aware of it," I said.

She looked at me again; her blue eyes grew dark, their expression altered, a look of age crept into them—there seemed to be the knowledge of centuries in their depths.

"I have a passion for jewels," she said, slowly, "for articles of vertu, for priceless, unique treasures. I am collecting such. I want Orion. If that gem of gems becomes my fortunate possession it would mean the overthrow of a certain lady, the recovery of an unfortunate girl, and the final extinction of a fiend in human guise."

As she spoke she rose, gave me a slow, inscrutable smile, and walked out of the hall.

By an arrangement which we both considered specially convenient Vandeleur and I had rooms each opening into the other, and when I heard my friend tap at my door just

before midnight I felt a sense of relief. I opened it for him and he entered. Crossing the room he flung himself into a deep chair and looked up at me.

"You have something to say, Druce. What is it?"

I replied briefly, giving him a full account of my interviews, first with Mrs. Bensasan and then with Madame Sara.

"You have had all the innings this afternoon," he said, with a smile. "That cry coming from the kennels is certainly ghastly."

The smile faded from his face; it looked sterner than I had ever

seen it before. After a pause he said, gravely:—

"This is our worst case. I offer my life willingly at the shrine of this mystery. Things have become intolerable; the end must be at hand. I have resolved to die or conquer in this matter."

As he spoke we both heard the cry of the wolves ringing out on the stillness of the midnight air.

"I shall examine those cellars to-morrow," said Vandeleur. "Good-night. I must be alone to think things over."

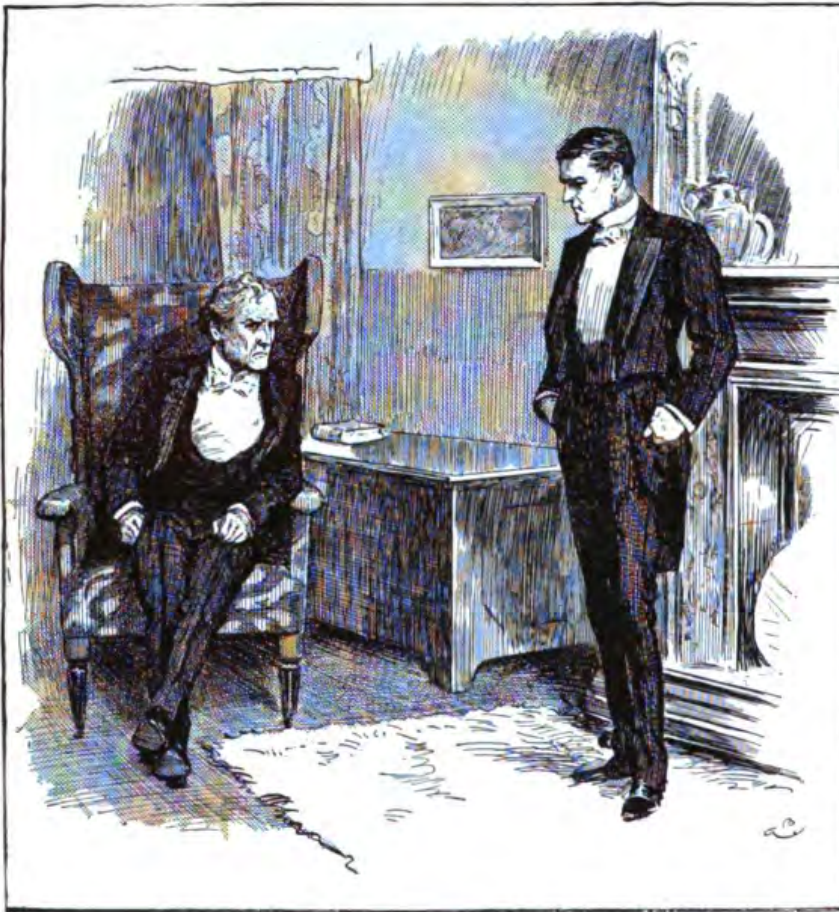
I did not detain him, and he left me.

At breakfast the next morning Mrs. Bensasan said:—

"I am glad to be able to tell you, Mr. Druce, that Taganrog is coming to his senses. I gave him a long lesson last night, and he begins to obey. He will be all right to-morrow night. In a fortnight's time he will be as meek as a lamb. He is, I consider, my greatest triumph. Mr. Vandeleur, I have already shown my pet wolf to Mr. Druce; would you like to see him?"

"I should," he answered, gently.

"I shall give Taganrog several lessons to-day," she continued, "and propose to give



"THE SMILE FADED FROM HIS FACE; IT LOOKED STERNER THAN I HAD EVER SEEN IT BEFORE."

him his first almost immediately. Will you come with me now or later? He is a great beauty. Mr. Druce admires him immensely. I am proud to feel that I am his conqueror. Although he will always be ferocious to the rest of the world, he will soon be amenable to my least word or look."

Neither of us made any reply, and Rigby, who was present, rose, gave Mrs. Bensasan a peculiar glance, and left the room. I noticed for the first time that with all her fearlessness she seemed to make an exception in his favour. When her eyes met his she did not look altogether at her ease. Fearless and strong as was her nature, was it possible that she was in this man's power?

"Have you told Mr. Vandeleur about that peculiar cry which we both heard yesterday?" continued Mrs. Bensasan, turning to me. "It frightened you, did it not?"

"It certainly did," I replied.

"Knowing so little about wild beasts as you do I am not surprised at that," was her answer. "It is, I assure you, quite a common error to mistake the cry of a brute for that of a human being, for brutes have

many tones in their voices, and the wolf in particular has a long gamut of sound in his larynx. Be that as it may, however, I should like you both to be satisfied. Under my kennels are three old disused cellars. Would you not like to go and search them? You will then know for yourselves whether there is any poor creature incarcerated there or not."

Vandeleur rose to his feet.

"I take you at your word, Mrs. Bensasan," he said. "I should like to examine the cellars. Will you come with me, Druce, or shall I go alone?"

"I will go with you," I replied.

"I am going down now to have the wolves locked into their kennels," said Mrs. Bensasan. "Will you follow me in about ten minutes' time?"

We did so. There were no keepers present, but Mrs. Bensasan stood within the enclosure of Taganrog's kennel with a smile on her face and the cruel whip in her hand. She unlocked the iron gates and invited us to enter. To my surprise I noticed that a great flagstone was raised within a couple of feet from the entrance to the enclosure, and we saw a well-like opening in the ground.

"Here is a lantern," said Mrs. Bensasan, handing one to Vandeleur. "I will wait here until you return."

We went down at once in silence. We were both absolutely aware of the danger we ran. It would be easy for Mrs. Bensasan to drop the flagstone over us and to incarcerate us within to starve out our lives. Nevertheless, I do not think we feared.

The air struck damp and chill about us. We heard the cries of the imprisoned wolves over our heads. There were three cellars, each opening into the other, but search as we would we could not see the smallest sign of any human being. Vandeleur stayed some time in the second cellar, examining it most

minutely, feeling the walls, and stamping his feet on the ground in order to detect any hollow spot. At last he turned to me and said, slowly:—

"Whoever cried that time yesterday has been removed. There is no use in our staying any longer."

We retraced our steps and soon found ourselves in the open air. Mrs. Bensasan's eyes were shining with intense excitement. There was a small, angry red spot on the centre of each cheek.

"Well, gentlemen," she said, "I hope you are satisfied?"

"Absolutely," replied Vandeleur.

She opened the gate for us and we passed through.

A minute later the excited cry of the released pack broke on our ears.

"Will you walk with me to the railway-station?" asked Vandeleur.

"What!" I cried, in some amazement, "are you going to town?"

"Yes, for a few hours. I have got an idea in my mind. I am haunted by a memory; it goes back a good way, too. I want to have it confirmed; it may bear on this case. If it does I may be able to release Miss Laura, for that she is detained in most undesirable captivity I have not the slightest doubt."

"What about the robberies?" I asked. "Is there anything of the sort going on?"

"As far as I can tell, nothing. We must hurry, Druce, if I am to catch my train."

I saw him off and returned slowly to the house. On my way back I met Gerald Hiliers. He was waiting to see me, and began to talk at once on the subject nearest his heart.

"Taganrog will be in control by to-morrow night," he said. "The exhibition is to take place by electric light, and Mrs. Bensasan is having a small platform raised for us to stand on while she exhibits. She is anxious to accustom the wolves to the flare and light which must be present when she holds her public exhibitions. By the way," he added, suddenly, "I saw Madame Sara this morning,

and she told me that she has given you her confidence. She promised to help me, but on an impossible condition. My father will never part with Orion except for a fabulous price. The diamond is watched day and night by two men, and the safe in which it is secured is practically impregnable. There is no help whatever in that direction."

"Have you told Madame Sara yet about your father's view of the matter?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And what did she say?"

"She smiled."

"Then, Hiliers, I counsel you to beware. I like Madame least of all when she smiles."

Vandeleur returned rather late that evening.



"THERE IS NO HELP WHATEVER IN THAT DIRECTION."

He informed me briefly that he was satisfied with his investigations, and that it was his intention to force Mrs. Bensasan's hand, by means known only to himself, if she did not soon reveal her daughter's whereabouts.

The next day was Wednesday; that night we were to see Mrs. Bensasan in the hour of her triumph. I awoke with an overpowering sense of restlessness and depression. Vandeleur was seen talking earnestly with Mrs. Bensasan soon after breakfast. Their conversation was evidently of an amicable kind, for when it was over she nodded to him, smiled, and hurried off in the direction of the kennels.

Vandeleur then, with long strides, disappeared up the avenue. I wondered what he was doing and what was the matter. I wanted his confidence, but did not care to press for it.

Shortly before lunch, as I was walking on the borders of the pine wood, I was amazed to see Madame Sara drive up in a dog-cart. She saw me, pulled in the mare which she was driving herself, flung the reins to the groom, and alighted with her usual agility.

"Ah!" she called out, "I am glad to see you. You wonder where I have been."

I made no reply.

"Confess to your curiosity," she continued. "This is an extraordinary day, and my nerves are in a strange state. Much—everything—hangs on the issues of to-night. Mr. Druce, I want to confide in you."

"Don't!" I could not help exclaiming.

"You must listen. This is what has happened. When friends fall out—ah! you know the old proverb—well, friends have fallen out, for Mrs. Bensasan and I have quarrelled; oh, my friend, *such* a quarrel! A point was to be solved. Julia Bensasan wished the solution to take one form, while I was just as resolved that it should take another. She is a powerful woman, both physically and mentally, but she is destitute of tact. She has no reserve of genius in her nature. Now, I——" she drew herself up—"I am Madame Sara, known to the world for very remarkable abilities. In this conflict I shall win."

"Explain, will you?" I said.

"Ah! you are curious at last. Mr. Druce, it is a very remarkable fact that you and your friend should have been fighting so hard against me for so many months, and in the end be altogether on my side."

"What do you mean?"

"Need you ask?" she replied. "Are not your wishes and mine identical? We want to make a girl happy. We have resolved to give her to the man who loves her and whom she loves. Need I say any more?"

"Madame Sara," I said, "you do nothing without a price. Have you a chance of receiving the diamond?"

"I have a passion," she said, slowly, "for things unique, strange, and priceless. I go far to seek them, still farther to obtain them. Neither life nor death stands in my way. Yes, the stone is mine."

"Impossible!"

"It is true. I went to town this morning. I saw old Mr. Hiliers. He gave me the diamond. I keep it on a condition."

I was speechless from amazement. She looked at me, then said, slowly:—

"I find the lost girl and give her to Gerald Hiliers."

"But why has his father changed his mind? Gerald told me only yesterday how callous he was with regard to the whole matter."

"Ah! he is callous no longer. He and I have both a desire, I for unique treasures and he for unlimited wealth. The love of gold is his passion. I have informed him with regard to some things in connection with Mrs. Bensasan. She is one of the richest women in England; Laura is her only child and heiress. I have done something else for him."

"What is that?"

"Imparted to him a secret by which he can in a measure recover his lost youth. To offer a man both youth and riches presents a temptation impossible for the ordinary man to resist. Mr. Hiliers is quite ordinary; he struggled, but in the end succumbed. I knew he would."

Her eyes sparkled.

"Will you tell me one thing?" I said.

"Why does Mrs. Bensasan want her daughter to marry Joseph Rigby? Is he so rich and so desirable?"

She came a step nearer.

"Your friend, Mr. Vandeleur, is on the track of that secret," she said. "I could tell him now, but I delay just for a time. As you know so much you may as well know this. Rigby is greater and more powerful than the richest man or the most beautiful or the greatest on earth. He holds a secret—it is connected with Mrs. Bensasan. Laura is the price of his silence. Ah! have I been overheard?"

She sprang away from me. There was a rustle in the bushes near by. I rushed up to them and tore them asunder. No one was to be seen. But Madame Sara's face had changed. It was full of a curious, most ghastly fear.

"I have been imprudent," she said, in a low voice, "and for the first time in my life. Is it possible that success has turned my brain?"

She did not wait to give me another glance, but hurried to the house.

We dined early that night, as Mrs. Bensasan's exhibition was to take place at eight o'clock. The dinner was gay; the conversation bright; repartee and wit sparkled like champagne. On the face of Mrs. Bensasan, however, there was a fierce, cruel look, which was so dominant that, with

all her efforts to appear friendly, sociable—in fact, the perfect hostess—she utterly failed. Once her eyes fixed themselves on Madame Sara's beautiful and charming face, and the expression in their agate depths was far from good to see.

The dinner came to an end. It was too soon to go to the kennels.

"There is still time enough," remarked Mrs. Bensasan, addressing Madame Sara. "Follow me in five minutes. You and I have our work to do first. When we are quite ready for the curtain to rise and the show to begin, my keeper, Keppel, shall announce the fact to the gentlemen."

Mrs. Bensasan went slowly from the room. I had never before been so impressed. Madame Sara beside her hostess looked young, slender, almost childish.

"That woman is the greatest of her age," said Madame. "How great only I who have known her for years can imagine. Mr. Rigby and I both know Mrs. Bensasan well, don't we, sir?"

We none of us spoke, and she went slowly towards the door. Just as she reached it she turned and faced us.

"I have provided against possible mischief," she said.

She thrust her hand into the bosom of her dress and drew out a small revolver. Minute as it was, I knew the sort, and was well aware that it could be used with deadly effect. With a gentle and sweet smile she returned it to its place; then, taking up a cloak which lay on a chair near, she flung it over her evening dress and disappeared into the night.

Four of us were now left in the hall—Rigby, Hiliers, Vandeleur, and myself.

"We shall be summoned in a minute," said Vandeleur. "This

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is a state of tension quite unpleasant in its strain."

He walked to the house door and threw it open. He had scarcely done so before the sharp crack of a shot sounded from the pine wood below the house. It was followed instantly by another. Fearing we knew not what, we all rushed from the hall and flew down the path through the pine wood. The bright electric light guided us; the howl of many wolves smote savagely on our ears.

In a very short time we had reached the little platform which had been erected in front of the huge cage where Mrs. Bensasan had arranged to give her exhibition. The cage was there, but to my surprise there was no keeper in sight. We instantly crowded on the platform and saw Mrs. Bensasan standing upright in the middle of the cage. She had the stock whip in her hand. A woman lay prostrate at her feet. The woman's fair hair streamed along the floor of the cage; her cloak was torn aside. There was a large and ghastly wound in her throat; blood covered the floor. At a little distance lay Taganrog, shot through the head and motionless. When she saw us approach Mrs. Bensasan turned.

Her face was quite calm and her manner quiet. She looked down at the figure of the fallen woman.

"Madame Sara, the great Madame Sara, is dead," she said, with slow distinctness. "She ventured into the cage; it was imprudent—I implored her not to come, but she would not heed. Her death is due to Taganrog. He feared me, but the sight of her maddened him. He sprang at her and tore her throat. It was but the work of a second. See, I have shot him. But Madame had also a revolver, and just in the moment of—of—ah! Heavens! Ah!"

She tottered; over her face there came an awful expression, and the next instant she also was



"THE GREAT MADAME SARA IS DEAD," SHE SAID.

lying on the floor of the cage. Long quivers passed over her frame. She was evidently in mortal agony. We all rushed forward, burst open the door of the cage, and entered.

Vandeleur went on his knees and bent over the prostrate woman.

"I die," she said; "I have only a few minutes to live. Listen!"

She tried to press her hand to her side; a great spurt of blood poured from her lips.

"I am shot through the lungs," she said. "Hers was the surest aim in the world. You may know all now. Madame Sara and I arranged this exhibition, and you, Mr. Vandeleur, were to be the victim. Madame got you both down here on purpose. It was she who thought the thing out; we did not believe we could manage the death of you both, but one at least seemed certain. Your methods were more deadly than those of Mr. Druce, therefore you were appointed to be the victim. But when the wicked quarrel—ah! you see for yourselves the result. You shall know all now.

"Joseph Rigby—yes, he is there, but it doesn't matter; he knew a story about me. Madame also knew, but he had the evidence and she had not. He could hang me—it happened years ago—I poisoned my husband."

"I know," said Vandeleur. "I found the particulars yesterday, in the books at Westminster. I meant to speak to you to-morrow—but no matter."

"Bah!" she said, "nothing matters now. I hated that feeble man. I poisoned him with arsenic. Rigby knew, and from that day he blackmailed me heavily. Six months ago he set his heart on securing my pretty, gentle Laura—Laura with her money was to be his price. I did not dare to give her to another. I was determined that she should marry him; I would make her submit. One night Madame and I took her away in a cab. This was to blind the neighbours. Towards morning we brought her back and put her into the cellars below the kennels. When you, Mr. Vandeleur, examined them, you knew nothing of a small dungeon below the second cellar. Laura was put there. She is gagged in the dungeon now. You will find the spot by a jagged cross scratched over the stone above. She is uninjured. She inherits my money. When I die Rigby will be powerless. You can give her to the other man."

Vandeleur placed his hand under her shoulders and slightly raised her head.

"Madame shot me through the lungs," she continued. "My life is only a matter

of minutes. I go to my death unabsolved and unafraid. Madame, at least, is dead. She was cleverer than I and more subtle. Ah! there never was a brain like hers. She arranged to help me; Rigby should obtain Laura, and you, Mr. Vandeleur, should die. All was going well, but avarice got the better of her. For the sake of a stone, a bauble, she gave me up, and I could not brook that. I resolved that the means which were meant to compass your death should compass hers. Revenge became the strongest motive of my life. My intention was, had all succeeded, to lay the blame on Taganrog. It would have been natural, would it not, to suppose that the wolf—But look!"

Her eyes sought the floor, and Vandeleur, bending down, picked up two great sets of steel teeth, fashioned somewhat after the teeth of a wolf. They jangled horribly as he shook them in his hand. The dying eyes gleamed.

"She made them," whispered the exhausted voice. "She made them for me to use in order to take you by surprise, to spring on you and tear your throat out. An excuse was to be made which was to bring you first on the scene to-night. The keepers were to be dismissed beforehand. All the world would suppose that it was an accident and that the wolf had destroyed you. She and I would have known better. I guessed her treachery and followed her to-day, and heard what she said to Mr. Druce. Instantly I changed my tactics. *You should live*, but *SHE should die!* I sent for her first on purpose. She must have scented my change of front, for she had her revolver. The wolf killed her—I had no need to use those hideous teeth; but before she died she raised that toy instrument and inflicted my death wound. It was I who shot the wolf—"

Her voice faded away into silence. The dimness of death covered her awful, too bright eyes. A minute or two later she breathed her last.

We rescued Laura Bensasan from her terrible prison. We took from that den a distracted and nearly mad girl. We brought her back to the house, and did all that ingenuity and kindness could suggest for her benefit. But one look at Hiliers was better for her than all our sympathy. She flew to him. He took her in his arms. He loved her and she loved him. There was no longer any bar to their happiness and future union.