

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the central text. The border is composed of repeating motifs of leaves, scrolls, and small circular accents, creating a classic, elegant frame.

**Followed**

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By L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace

## 1900

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

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

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

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

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

"Your account of your mother is rather alarming," I could not help saying. "Must

I live with her after we are married, David?"

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

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

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

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

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

At last, a month after our letters were written, I received a very cordial invitation from Lady Sarah. She invited me to spend Christmas with David and herself at Longmore. She apologized for her apparent rudeness in not writing sooner, but said she had not been well. She would give me, she said, a very hearty welcome, and hoped I would visit the old place in the second week in December and remain over Christmas.

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

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

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

of years.

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

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

Never mind! ♦ No girl could care for David Ross a little. She must love him with all her heart, and soul, and strength, or hate him. I cared for him all the more because of his faults. He was human, interesting, very tender when he chose, and he loved me with a great love.

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

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

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

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

I did what I was bid. She gazed from her superior height into my eyes. As my

eyes met hers I was suddenly overpowered by the most extraordinary feeling which had ever visited me. All through my frame there ran a thrill of ghastly and overmastering fear. I shrank away from her, and I believe my face turned white. She drew me to her side again, stooped, and kissed me. Then she said, abruptly:  
—

“Don’t be nervous”—and then she turned to her son.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where is your mother?” I asked.

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

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

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

Suddenly she broke off.

“Dinner is late,” she said. “Ring the bell, David.”

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

“Is dinner served, Sambo?” inquired his mistress.

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

Lady Sarah got up.

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

David led the way with me; Lady Sarah followed. David took the foot of the table, his mother the head. I sat at Lady Sarah’s left hand.

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

interloper.

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

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

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

"Come, Flower," she said.

She took my hand in one of hers.

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

He smiled at her.

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

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

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

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

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

"Tut!" she replied. "Do you imagine that a little creature like you can put a woman like me out? ♦ But we won't talk personal things tonight. I want you to



see the great charm of my present life. You must know that I have for several years eschewed society. David has mingled with his kind, but I have stayed at home with my faithful servant Sambo and—my pets.”

“Your pets!” I said: “dogs, horses?”

“Neither.”

“Cats then, and perhaps birds?”

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

“Then what kind of pets have you?” I asked. “Reptiles,” she said, shortly. “Would you like to see them?”

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

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

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

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

“I am not afraid,” I replied.

“That is good. Then come with me.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Is he—venomous?" I asked.

My lips trembled so that I could scarcely get out the words.

"Four hours for a man," was the laconic reply. "We count the degree of poison of a snake by the time a man lives after he is bitten. This fellow is, therefore, comparatively harmless. But see, here is the *Pseudechis Porphyriacus*—the black snake of Tasmania and Australia. His time is six minutes. Wake up, Darkey!" and she tapped the glass with her knuckles.

An enormous glistening coil, polished as ebony, moved, reared its head, and disappeared into the shadow of the wall. I gave a visible shudder. Lady Sarah took no notice. She walked slowly between the cases, explaining various attributes and particulars with regard to her favourites.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, thank you,” I replied.

She put the snake back again and locked the door.

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

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

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

He went to the piano, and almost without prelude began to sing. He had a

magnificent voice, like a great organ. Lady Sarah joined him. He and she sang together, the wildest, weirdest, most extraordinary songs I had ever listened to. They were mostly Spanish. Suddenly Lady Sarah took out her guitar and began to play—David accompanying her on the piano.

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

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

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

“Yes,” I said.

“And aren’t you nearly dead with terror of them, miss?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You look the part. You are very-much like a flower of the field. Your pretty

name, and your pretty ways, and your fair complexion foster the idea. Mother admires you; she thinks you very sweet to look at. Now come into the morning-room and talk to her.”

That day, after lunch, it rained heavily. We were all in the morning-room, a somewhat dismal apartment, when David turned to his mother.

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

“What do you say?” inquired his mother.

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

“I don’t think it matters,” said Lady Sarah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She laid the tiara on the table.

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

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

“And I don’t want to wear them,” I cried. “I don’t like them.”

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

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

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

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

He went to the stables to order the dogcart to be got ready, and I ran up to my room to put on my hat and warm jacket.

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

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

“This,” said David, “is called the ‘Slaughter Stone.’ On this stone the Druids killed their victims.”

“How interesting and how horrible!” I cried.

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

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

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

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

“But why dull?” interrupted David. “Flower will enjoy a day by herself with you, mother. She wants to know you, she wants to love you, as I trust you will soon love her.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Certainly I will,” I replied.

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

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

“What do you mean?” I said.

She shrugged her shoulders significantly.

““This is a queer house,” she said—“there are queer people in it, and there are queer things done in it, and—\_there are the reptiles!” \_

I gave an involuntary shiver.

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

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

“I will, if you like,” she said. “Sambo shan’t have them. Now, miss, I think you have everything you want.”



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

◆ What did she mean, too, by speaking of Lady Sarah's wild fits?

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

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

“What do you mean?” I asked.

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

“I cannot,” I said.

“You won't be happy here. The life is not your life. The man is not the right sort of man for you. In some ways he is half a savage. He has been much in wild countries, in lands uninhabited by civilized people. He is not the man for you, nor am I the mother-in-law for you. Give him up. Here is paper and here is a pen. Write him a letter. Write it now, and the carriage shall be at the door and you will be taken to Wilton—from there you can get a train to London, and you will be safe, little girl, quite safe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Darkey!” I exclaimed.

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

I made no remark.

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

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

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

feel surrounded me would be over.

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

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

I sprang to my feet, my heart beating violently.

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

"What do you mean?" I asked.

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

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

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

"Do you mean it?" I said.

"*Yowi*—yes."

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

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

"I will go," I whispered.

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

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

“One cup strengthen missie, then short track ‘cross Plain straight ahead to Wilton. Moon in sky. Missie safe then from old missis, from Darkey, and from Sambo.”

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

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

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

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

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

Was Lady Sarah mad, was Sambo mad, and what ailed Darkey, the awful black snake whose bite caused death in six minutes? As the thought of Darkey came to me, making my heart throb until I thought it would stop, I felt a strange and unknown sensation of fatigue creeping over me: my feet began to lag. I could not account for this. I took out my watch and looked at it. I felt so tired that to go on without a short rest was impossible. There was a stone near. I sat on it for a

moment or two. While resting I tried to collect my scattered thoughts. I wondered what sort of story I should tell David: how I would appease his anger and satisfy him that I did right in flying like a runaway from the home which was soon to be my own. As these thoughts came to me I closed my eyes; I felt my head nodding. Then all was lost in unconsciousness.

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

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

Suddenly I paused and looked back. I fancied that I heard a noise, very slight and faint and different from that which the wind made as it sighed over the vast, billowy undulations of the Plain. Now, as I looked back, I saw something about fifty yards away, something which moved swiftly over the short grass. Whatever the thing was, it came towards me, and as it came it glistened now and then in the moonlight. What could it be? I raised my hand to shade my eyes from the bright light of the moon. I wondered if I was the subject of an hallucination. But, no; whatever that was which was now approaching me, it was a reality, no dream. It was making straight in my direction. The next instant every fibre in my body was tingling with terror, for gliding towards me, in great curves, with head raised, was an enormous black snake!

For one moment I gazed, in sickened horror, and then I ran—ran as one runs in a nightmare, with thumping heart and clogged feet and knees that were turned to water. There could be no doubt of what had happened: the great black snake, Darkey, had escaped from Longmore and was following me. Why had it escaped? How had it escaped? Was its escape premeditated? Was it meant to follow me? Was I the victim of a pre-arranged and ghastly death? Was it—was it?—my head reeled, my knees tottered. There was not a tree or a house in sight. The bare, open plain surrounded me for miles. As I reeled,

however, to the crest of the rise I saw, lying in the moonlight, not a quarter of a mile away, the broken ring of Stonehenge. I reached it in time to clamber on to one of the stones. I might be saved. It was my only chance.

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

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

"Drink this, Flower."

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

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

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

"Not back to Longmore?"

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

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

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

I was too weak to resist her. She did not look unkind. There was no madness in her eyes. At that moment Sambo appeared in view. Sambo lifted me from the

stone and carried me to a dogcart which stood on the Plain. Lady Sarah seated herself by my side, took the reins, and we drove swiftly away.

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

“Drink, and be quick,” she said, in an imperious voice. ❖

I obeyed her; I was afraid to do otherwise.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied, in a semi-whisper.

“Then listen.”

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

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

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

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

“Why did you write at last—why did you ask me here?” I said then.

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

“Sane!” I cried.

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

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

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

Lady Sarah wiped the drops of perspiration from her forehead.

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



“How can I keep it from him?”

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

She left the room.

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

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

“I will never tell him,” I whispered.

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

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

I am David’s wife, and David does not know. He will never know. We are still on our honeymoon, but David is in trouble, for by the very last post news reached him of Lady Sarah’s sudden death. He was absent from her when she breathed her last. He shall never know the worst. He shall always treasure her memory in his heart.

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*etext prepared by Joe Harvat*