

DOCKRELL'S DEPARTURE.

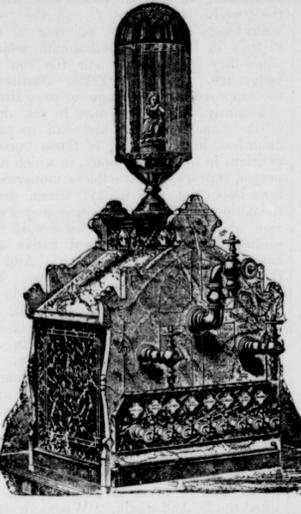
Whatever else Dockrell intended to do, it was evident that he did not mean to go. Mrs. Rasleigh began to be alarmed. She had asked him down, to be sure, without specifying the exact day he was to leave; but now the last guest had made the last pretty speech, and the dog cart containing a lingering sportsman and his belongings was disappearing down the drive, and yet, by a blazing fire in the cosy study, she knew that at that moment Willoughby Dockrell was unfolding the morning's papers and lighting a cigar, with that complacent smile which irritated her so much when she was not in the mood for it. And she was by no means in the mood for it today. It was not only that a fresh set of people were to arrive tomorrow, most of whom would by no means share her enthusiasm for the poet who was now stretched at his ease in her favorite armchair, but that the party invited for the next few days was to include a faithful and somewhat stolid admirer, Maj. Champion. Now, Mrs. Rasleigh was not of the order of women who are unhappy if they have not a second lover to play off on the first. Under such circumstances, she opined, both were apt to be fretful and unamusing. Mrs. Rasleigh, to be sure, had been a widow for exactly five years, so that it may be inferred that she knew something of the other sex. Young, cheerful, and well off, without being pretty, she was distinctly attractive, and having the social instinct, her place in Blankshire was nearly always full. In London she was inclined to affect the "smart intellectual set," and she liked to be credited with ideas and opinions. Ideas and opinions were, perhaps, rather scarce in the circles in which Mrs. Rasleigh usually moved. It was probably this which had made her seek the society of Dockrell, for the man, at any rate, had brains. But there were questions which she could not help asking herself in her present uneasy frame of mind. Apart from a volume of poems which had made a certain stir, who and what was he? Nobody seemed quite to know, least of all in the rather fashionable set into which he had effected an entrance. He had a clean-cut face, plausible manners, and a pretty talent for giving the talk a neat and epigrammatic turn; while it was certain that he had lived in Paris, in Rome, and in New York, and that he knew everybody a little and nobody well. If men, too, instinctively disliked him, it was notorious that for most women he had an irresistible attraction, so that one was apt to meet Willoughby Dockrell more frequently in inner drawing rooms than in the more breezy mental atmosphere of the clubs. But though Mrs. Rasleigh was fond of having long discussions with her literary admirer, it by no means followed that she intended to continue those discussions for life, and during the last day or two Dockrell had assumed an all-conquering air which was distasteful to her. It is always awkward for a hostess to have to tell a guest to go, and Mrs. Rasleigh racked her brains for an expedient as the hall door closed to on the last member of the party and she thoughtfully crossed the hall. "Well, I shall have to tell Jack all about it when he comes tomorrow," she said to herself at last, with a little sigh of relief which a woman gives when she has determined to transfer her troubles to shoulders broader than her own. And meanwhile Willoughby Dockrell, having finished a second cigar was meditating on his plan of campaign. For nearly thirty hours he would have his charming hostess to himself, for the young sister who was there to play propriety hardly counted, and he would surely be able to get her to drive or to ride alone with him that very afternoon. Thirty hours, he told himself, alone in a country house with a woman who obviously likes you, is worth thirty months of afternoon calls and dinner conversations in London. He glanced round the room. . . . How delightful it all was; so cosy, so old-fashioned, with the air of having been always just like that. . . . The leather bindings of the books were worn and mellowed, the gilt of the picture-frames was a little dim with age. A Romney and a Gainsborough—portraits of departed Rasleighs—gazed down on him from either side of the fireplace. A grand-uncle with dilettante tastes, who had made the "Grand Tour," had brought back that Canova from Rome. . . . Generations of gentlefolks had lived, and read, and chatted in that room. At his age, and with his tastes, it was all just what appealed to him most; the sense of security, of rest, of long unchanging years. Willoughby Dockrell had been of late a frequent guest in English country houses, but no home that he had entered had appealed to him quite so intimately as this. A man of forty-five, who has lived in most of the capitals of civilization, generally turns at last to some such haven. At forty-five, the boulevards of Paris, the clubs of London, and the balls of New York may begin to pall. At that uncertain age when he is neither old nor young, he had begun to think that a man wanted a home, a position, and a wife. Now, all these things, he thought, were well within his reach. There were no children; the place was here for her life time, after which it would go to a distant cousin. As to that unpleasant affair in America—well, it all happened fifteen years ago, and New York is a long way from London, even if London is tolerably near New York. Only one man in England knew anything about the story of those bonds, and that man he was certain not to meet in a smart country house. And then Mrs. Rasleigh had said nothing in her note of invitation as to the length of his stay; indeed, it had been a word or two only. Dockrell took the note out of his pocket, and read it with a curiously satisfied smile. "Can't you come and see me in the country?" it ran (and the fact of their being no beginning was an important one in the eyes of such a student of femininity as Willoughby Dockrell). "I shall have some nice people staying with me at the beginning of the month. Could you come on the 3rd? We shall be able to discuss Bourget—and lots of things!" "Ever sincerely yours, "LETTY RASLEIGH."

tired to bed. The next day it was not much better, but early in the afternoon he did find her alone. Willoughby Dockrell was too much of a diplomatist to show his hand before he saw what his adversary was likely to play; but still, the time was short, his opportunities few, while the advent of a fresh batch of visitors might spoil the game completely. At the end of a quarter of an hour's talk Mrs. Rasleigh began to feel uncomfortable, and more than ever was she resolved to tell Major Champion the whole story, directly he arrived. She got away, and shut herself up in her room until the first batch of her new guests were announced. "What, in heaven's name, is that fellow doing down here?" was Champion's first question, when he found himself at first alone with his hostess before dressing. She was silent for a moment, but she did not pretend not to know what he meant. "Well, you see, he goes everywhere; he's very clever, and a sort of celebrity in his way, and—I wish I hadn't asked him!" "So do I," said Champion, fervently. "But it's not only his coming that's the matter," said Letty, incoherently; "but I'm sure he means to stay. He will never go." "Oh, yes, he will. He'll go tomorrow morning." "Jack, I can't have it. I won't have a row in this house. Why, the newspapers will get hold of it, and—I shall never forgive you if you do anything horrid." "I'm not going to do anything horrid. I shall just mention in the smoking room tonight that Jobson, the editor of the Evening Telephone, is coming down here tomorrow for a day or two." "But, my dear Jack, Jobson isn't coming! I don't even know him. How on earth will that help us?" "Wait and see. If the thing works I'll tell you all about it. You're a ridiculous little person, you know, and utterly unfit to take care of yourself. You'd much better let—"

**A FIGHT IN THE DARK.**  
An Orchid Collector's Frightful Struggle With an Anaconda.  
"I have spent half my life in Brazil," said Mr. Bentley, the orchid collector, "and Para was my headquarters for many years. Thirty years ago orchid collecting was a dangerous business, especially along the Amazon. What with hostiles and wild beasts a white man ran considerable risks if he left the settlements. At first I used to hire friendly Indians to go with me into the forests, but they were such a superstitious lot that I found it more profitable to go alone. It used to make my hair stand on end to hear their yarns about the wild man of the woods and the great swamp snake—talk about sea serpents, they are only eels to this monster with its three hundred feet of snakey body. Every queer sound one hears in the primeval forest they attribute to one of these imaginary sources, and I've had a whole camp stampeded, and lost a pile of money more than once by their refusing to go on, after perhaps a month of hard pushing through the bush, just because of some peculiar sound they deemed an omen of warning from those creatures. But I had a scare or two myself from snakes and the closest shave for my life right here near Para. When I first landed in the town it was only a little settlement, and snakes—big snakes—twenty feet long went streaking through the streets every day. The natives killed and ate them, and I don't despise a mess of snake meat myself—it's not half bad when you get used to it. Time and again I've seen big anacondas and boas coiled round trees waiting for something to come along, but beyond keeping a sharp lookout that they shouldn't catch me I never bothered them. But we came together one day, and a nasty experience it was. You see, I had ridden out about twenty miles due west, following the river, but had found nothing new in the way of flowers. Late in the afternoon I headed back for town, striking off on a fresh track through a forest tolerably free from undergrowth. The leaves lay several feet deep and were still dry underfoot, though the rainy season was commencing. More from habit than expectation I kept glancing up at the treetops, for that is where most orchids are to be found, and suddenly I spied a lovely mass of purple blossoms such as I had never seen before. I was off my horse and swarming up that tree in no time. A ship was sailing for England the next day and those orchids might mean a fortune to me. I dared not risk going back to town for help, for a "beat" in bulbs is worth as much as a "beat" in news. For half an hour I slashed away with my knife, strewing the ground with roots, not even stopping to brush away the swarms of insects that tried to make a sieve of my hide. The next thing I knew was that my horse was straining wildly at his lariat, snorting and plunging in an awful fright. Before I could give a yell the lariat broke and off he went, tail and mane on end. Then I heard a queer rushing sound, like a strong wind stirring up the leaves, yet the air was still. It came nearer and nearer, and glancing downwards I saw the great shining brown body of an enormous anaconda whirling by not ten yards from where my horse had stood. I should be afraid to say how long I thought it was or how big around, but I was everlastingly thankful for being up that tree. It flashed by like the wind, passing close beneath me, scurrying, rustling and hissing along and disappearing into a swampy thicket about 300 yards away. I could trace its course by the waving reeds for quite a while. I would not have missed that sight for a good round sum, but the loss of my horse annoyed me considerably. On foot, I could only carry a small bundle of orchids, and as they were very rare I wanted to ship a big load. Besides I was at least ten miles from town, it was getting late and it was not pleasant to think of spending a night in the woods with that big snake around. So I hurried down from the tree, gathered a good pile of the roots and set off homewards. "You know how a tropical storm comes up. A small cloud appears on the horizon. In half an hour the sky is covered and it becomes dark as night. There's a rush and a roar of wind, a lurid blaze, a burst of terrific thunder, and down comes the rain in floods. Before the blast the trees bent to the ground, great limbs came crashing down and I took to the swampy marsh or the river banks. I stumbled along as fast as possible, the livid flashes lighting my way, but my orchids soon began to feel heavy. Suddenly an extra brilliant glare showed me one of those low palm-thatched mud huts the Indian fisherman build along the banks of the river. Here's luck, I thought, for no one would be in there at that time of the year and I decided to go in, light a fire and dry off till the storm ceased. In I went and as a flood of rain followed me I quickly shut the door. Of course it was pitch dark inside and I began to feel for my matches. I remember thinking it smelt pretty loud in there, even for an Indian hut, and that as soon as I had a fire going I'd open that door again. The roar of the wind and the fierce rumbling bellow of the thunder made such a fearful uproar I could hardly have heard myself shout, but as I carefully unrolled the oilskin case that held my matches I distinctly heard a loud scraping rustle somewhere around me. Just then I got a match and thinking someone might be in there I yelled out, "I'll have a light in a second!" and pawed around for a dry spot to strike on. I scratched off the heads of two matches without getting a spark, then somehow I felt that queer creepy sensation coming over me that tells a man he is in danger from some malign presence. But I brazened up and moved a little ways from the door to try another match. A splutter but no light, then something touched me and that peculiar scuttling sounded all around the hut. The place seemed alive with something uncanny—what it was I couldn't guess—what's more I didn't want to know. The door was behind me, somewhere to my right. I sprang to where I thought it was, stretched out my arm, but too late. Two fiery eyes came right at me; I threw up my left arm to guard my face, it was seized as by a vise and I was jerked off my feet and thrown to the ground. I grabbed at the thing's throat and felt the horrible, cold, scaly hide of a snake. It was a monster, too, for I had hardly realized what a terrible foe I had to deal with when it lifted me off my feet. But quickly as it moved I was a little quicker yet. I had hardly touched those

slippery scales when I threw my legs around the brute's neck and drew my knife. As I was carried off my feet and before it could throw its terrible coils about me, I had plunged my weapon three times into its squirming neck. "The anaconda let go of my arm and tried to push me off by pressing its coils against me, but I hung on, stabbing away until torrents of blood loosened my hold and I slipped off. The struggle hardly lasted ten seconds, though it takes much more time to tell. When I fell to the ground I jumped up quickly to find the door, but the writhing, flopping monster seemed to fill the room. I reached the wall, but the large body squeezed me so that I was forced to get away; then I stumbled over another part of the brute and fell against the floor. Every rib cracked as a cold snake scraped over me and I thought all was up, but I struggled to my feet and found a corner where I flattened myself into as small a space as I could. The stench was covered with blood, the heat and floor was overpowering. I had lost my knife and could see nothing. Cowering there in the dark I expected every second to be crushed. It was an awful experience. Sick and faint, I hoped the end would come quickly by some sudden blow, for I was too weak to fight any longer. About to sink to the floor from exhaustion, I suddenly heard a loud crash, and fresh air rushed into the hut. By its frantic lashing and thumping the snake had burst open the door. I don't know how I got out, but I never stopped running till I fell breathless among the reeds a mile from town. Next day I got a party of men, and though pretty well used up, I went with them to that hut. The anaconda had died inside. My knife thrusts had nearly severed its head off and yet it had struggled about with fearful strength for I don't know how long. We dragged it out, pulled it up to a tree limb and a man went up and slipped its hide off. It was a magnificent olive brown hue, beautifully spotted with black, and measured thirty-three feet in length by six in its widest part. I shipped the skin to the old country with those orchids and it brought me a pretty penny, but I don't care to make money that way."—Free Press.

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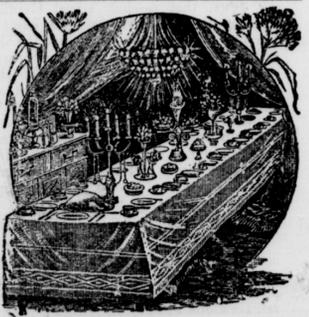
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