PROFESSOR ZIRCON

MURIEL MADDOX was a blonde frail piquant thing, a fluffy baby of nineteen easy summers. But she was a hard-working orphan, too, with no relations but a semi-mythical brother on the Yukon who had not found enough gold to send her any; and she earned her living—two pounds a week—as violinist to the splendid tea-parties of the Hotel Escoffier. Her liking for Professor Zircon was little more than a child's, though the shaggy-headed old analyst told another story to his brother experts at the War Office. And indeed, though her nature was incapable of great passion, what she had she gave, and to the innocence of a child added a dog's fidelity and trust. Professor Zircon was a happy old man; he called her his Chloride of Gold. Muriel means salt, you know, he would explain to the fellows at the Club, and salt is a compound of hydrochloric or muriatic acid—I wonder if we shall produce a little Zirconium Chloride! At this jest thus elaborated he was wont to laugh seven times a week; and trot happily back to his house in Kensington for dinner. Seven times a week he would let himself in through the laboratory and pretend surprise when he found Muriel reading a novelette in his own armchair.

"What, what! and how the deuce did you get in?" or "Tut! tut! my dear madam, to what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?" or "I beg a thousand pardons, madam, I really thought this was my house," and Muriel, genuinely pleased and amused, would enter into the little comedy,

always ending up with kisses in the old armchair, and a dainty dinner.

This had continued for nearly three years with no interruption but once when the Professor's wife, from whom he had long been separated, succeeded in getting into the house on some pretence, and creating a very considerable uproar before the Professor and his butler could master her rage. She was a big muscular woman from Australia with the body of a tiger and the temper of a snake. She would have made a winning fight of it but for Zircon's adroit sortie to the laboratory and timely return with a bottle of chloroform.

The Professor dined alone that night; at the very outset of the battle Muriel had fled in tears to the little room in Walham Green where she lived under the alleged guardianship of a most paunchy ex-dresser.

No other incident disturbed the ripples of their harmless, petty liaison. Even the earlier rumours of the brother in Alaska had died down to folk-lore. The Professor had never got away from his work in time to hear her play the fiddle; anyhow, he hated music. Nor had Muriel ever stayed too late to alarm her landlady, who thought she played at supper as well as at tea. The illness of the Secretary for War alarmed only the German Ambassador, who could not be positive that in case of his death an accident might not happen and a capable person be appointed to the post. The annoyance of his death—telephoned to the Office at three o'clock one afternoon—was concentrated on Professor Zircon, torn away from a compound with half the Greek Alphabet dotted about its name by a white-haired little Colonel who

assured him that it really wasn't decent. "We won't go to the Club, dear man. We'll just drop in at the Escoffier for tea." The Professor grunted an assent; but he was more than half pleased. He wondered what his fairy looked like in her butterfly wings.

The lounge of the Escoffier was full of people; but right across the room Professor Zircon could see Muriel with cornflowers in her yellow-ashen hair and her simple muslin dress. But she wore the diamonds he had given her, a string of starlight at her neck. How well he remembered that evening! He had taken her into the laboratory and heated up some sugar with sulphuric acid, loving her amazement as it swelled and blackened. "That is carbon now," he had said, "if we could only crystallize it, what splendid diamonds we could have! But we can't—not to any effect. Diamonds are always found in a kind of blue mud—I suppose there can't be any here?" leading her to a box full of modelling clay which he used in some of his experiments. And he made her dive and dirty her dear little fingers ever so, before she ran against the necklace. And when they retrieved it quite, and washed it, and he put it round her neck for her very own!

She played in her demure, modest way; not very good, but pleasing enough to people who only wanted an excuse for not having to think sufficiently to talk while they wolfed *foie gras* and watercress, muffins and éclairs, cheesecakes and hot buttered toast. And she seemed to care as little for them as they for her.

The Professor and the Colonel had risen to go.

"That's my little Muriel—I call her the Spirit of Salt—ha! ha! ho!" "A damn nice little bit of fluff—damn lucky boy!" growled the Colonel, winking at a chorus girl (in two thousand pounds worth of furs) whose salary was thirty shillings a week.

Suddenly the Professor paled. A last glance over his shoulder showed him that a bearded man had risen and was handing a flower to Muriel. And Muriel was blushing and trembling with some emotion too profound to estimate, but clear enough to the analyst.

When a man has detected a thousandth of a grain of atropine in the carcass of a barmaid, he does not hesitate to read the heart of a girl. And as a Government expert he was clothed with official infallibility—a triple buckler.

He went on casually talking to the Colonel for a few minutes before politeness allowed him to throw himself into a moving taxicab and roar his address at the astonished driver. It was the first time he had come home to an empty house since he had picked up Muriel on an omnibus and carried her off to a discreet Italian restaurant near Sloane Square where a flask of Chianti emptied to the bottom had left not a dreg of discretion.

The arm-chair shocked him. This was the last time that she would sit in it, the false little harlot! The eternal emptiness of things, the unbreakable solitude of life, struck a chill to his marrow. How was he to know that only by uttermost surrender of the self to the Beloved can that curse be broken?

Then a gleam of sanity crossed the bigoted scientific mind of the man. She might be able to explain. But he brushed away the idea. How can a fact ever be upset?

Credulity itself is reason compared to the mind of the logician who has once allowed emotion to infect his brain, who has missed the factor of the personal equation.

The idea returned. So long she had sat there in her childish purity that the conservatism of his hard old brain reacted. It could not be. Things could not change. Yet? In the upshot he was English enough to try her before condemning her, German enough to lay a trap for her in the very nature of that trial.

His consideration passed from judgment to execution, and his face set like a mask. Ultimately he went to a small safe in the wall, took out a half-hoop diamond ring, and dropped it into the coal-scuttle. Reward or punishment! Either the old trick—or a new one! He turned on his heel and went softly into the laboratory.

Meanwhile Muriel Madox tripped along from the Escoffier in the bright February air. Her heart was very light and very anxious. The incident of the afternoon—should she tell the Professor? Concealment was foreign to her nature; for the first time in her life she hesitated. How would it affect their relations?

It would be better to think it over, to sleep on it. It never occurred to her for a moment that the Professor might already know. In the end she decided to say nothing; but so absorbed had been her tiny brain in its little problem that

she forgot the obvious corollary of removing the flower from her dress.

She was nestled in the arm-chair when the old analyst tiptoed into the room and clapped his hands over her eyes. "Who is it?" said he gaily.

"Why, you're Jack from Alaska, of course," she answered, laughing. "Guess again?" And the child guessed the German Emperor, and Lewis Waller, and everyone else she could think of. "Wrong." "Wrong." "Wrong." "Why," she cried, jumping up and facing him, "it's Professor Zircon! The last person in the world I should have expected to find here!"

She threw her arms round his neck and called him a "dear silly."

"Well, what's the news, child?"

"No news. I'm so sorry the chief's dead."

"Doesn't matter to me. What a pretty flower in your dress!"

She had an instinct of sudden and terrible danger; and lied instantly. "I bought it for your buttonhole." And she fastened it there.

Professor Zircon called her a sweet, thoughtful fairy, and gave her a kiss. Such a shudder ran through him as rarely stirred his veins. He had some flash of memory, of Judas, perhaps, signalled across the forty years since he had heard the legend of the Gospels at his mother's knee.

"But there is news!" he added gaily. "I'm going to show you my great discovery. I've found out how to make

diamonds. Just crystallizing coal, you see; so simple when you know how to do it. Wait a minute! And he fetched a small electric machine from the laboratory and solemnly made it spark in the coal-scuttle. There! he announced triumphantly. Now we'll see if we've managed to crystallize any coal!"

So the child began to hunt in the scuttle, and in a few minutes found the ring glittering in its dusty setting, like the eyes of a snake in the jungle.

"Oh, you darling!" she cried. "Oh, you old fraud! You said nothing about making gold!"

"Ah! that's a little accident," replied the Professor. "Discoveries never come singly."

"And is it really for me? All my very own?"

"Who else should it be for, darling?"

"You're a darling sweet boy."

"Run away and wash your hands! I've warmed up your own element for you, you dear little Spirit of Salt!"

She ran gleefully into the laboratory. On the bench stood the basin she had used so often, with the soap and towels neatly at its side. She seized the soap, and plunged both hands into the nearly boiling hydrochloric acid. Then she turned her head to him, her mouth a tragic square, incapable even of uttering even a shriek.

"How will you play the fiddle," screamed Zircon, "with no fingers? How will you play the harlot? I saw you and your lover. There's his flower!" He flung it at her. "But I'm even with you—Oh! I'm even with you!" And he foamed into a spate of the filthiest abuse.

It broke the spell. Scream after scream broke from her

mouth until, choking with their very volume, her voice broke to a strangled yell, and the agony of the acid bit into her soul. She fell on the floor fainting.

"Vile thing!" screamed Zircon, spurning her with his foot. He choked: his brain fell suddenly clear with the lucidity of intellect. He walked into the dining-room, and whistled as he walked. There he sat down. The next move in his infernal revenge was the waking of Muriel, and that might be soon or late. He had not calculated the effect of waiting; his nerves cried out. For the first time he had a glimpse of the doctrine of eternal punishment—perceived that the resurrection of the body was no necessary condition. Tortured, he gazed upon the second hand of his watch. He could have sworn it stopped, when it shook and staggered on with the importance of Big Ben, and he realized that his own time-sense was radically upset. He wondered if it was the same with her—the devil in him gloated.

"A gentleman to see you, sir!" said the butler, opening the door. "He wouldn't give his name!"

"I'll see him," said Zircon, as blithe as a lark. "Show him in!"

In strode the bearded stranger of the afternoon.

"You damned scoundrel!" he addressed the smiling Professor. "So this is where my sister spends her evenings! Be good enough to explain——" He broke off, for the Professor had thrust both hands deep into his trouser pockets and leant back against the bookcase, laughing, laughing, laughing.

ALEISTER CROWLEY.

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THE EQUINOX

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