

THE THIEF IN THE NIGHT

BY

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The Thief In The Night

CHAPTER I

...also ask your wife where she was on Saturday, the 23rd, when she was supposed to be in the country. I can tell you that she was dining tête-à-tête with a young guards officer at his flat.

Yours sincerely,

A Candid Friend.

LORD WIDDICOMBE put down the letter with a contemptuous smile. For a second he was inclined to tear it up and throw the written venom into the fire. Of this, however, he thought better, and rang the bell for his valet.

"Frank, will you ask her ladyship to be so good as to come to me?"

In a few minutes came Lady Widdicombe, slight and pretty. She was twenty years younger than her lord, but there was no happier pair in the land.

"My dear," said the earl, with a twinkle in his grey eyes, "somebody has been trying to break up our happy home."

He passed the letter to her and watched the anger kindle in her face as she read.

"What a beast!" she gasped. "The 23rd; why, I dined with Ronnie that night, of course!"

"A young guards officer! My stepson!"

Lord Widdicombe chuckled and patted her cheek.

"You're a wicked woman," he said solemnly, "and I've found you out. But who the devil is the writer?"

Lady Widdicombe shook her head.

"It's wicked, abominable," she said vehemently; "of course, it does no mischief where you and I are concerned, but think what it means when that kind of letter goes into a household where suspicion already exists? And by the way, Willie, the burglar has been busy again—Mrs. Crewe-Sanders has lost a most valuable diamond plaque."

His lordship raised his eyebrows.

"Another plaque? That is about the fourth that has been taken in a month—I admire that burglar's consistency; by heavens, he is a gentleman and a scholar compared with A Candid Friend. Don't tell Diana, she'll be fearfully worried."

His wife was silent. She stared through the long french windows across the rain-soaked park, and it was clear that the dismal prospect was not the cause of her absorption.

"I wonder why Diana so dislikes Barbara May?" she asked thoughtfully.

His lordship grinned.

"It is such a joy to find Diana holding strong views on any subject," he said, "that I'll forgive even her dislike of Barbara May. But don't tell her about the letter—I'm sending it up to Scotland Yard. By the way, talking of Scotland Yard, I have asked Jack Danton to come down for the cricket week. It's rum, a fellow like that being in the police."

But Lady Widdicombe was thinking of something else as she drifted out of the library.

She found Diana Wold sitting in the little drawing-room overlooking the rosary—a soddened rosary that bore no resemblance to the lovely pleasance which the summer would bring—and Diana, looking ethereal in white, had a volume of poetry open on her knees.

She raised her violet blue eyes as her cousin entered, and put down the book.

Diana's beauty was the fragile beauty of delicate china, her quick smile was appealing and just a little sad.

She rose and kissed the other on the cheek, and gave the impression by a certain timidity that she was a little scared of her self-possessed relative.

"Why do you dislike Barbara?" asked Elsie Widdicombe with that directness which was her most disconcerting quality.

The girl laughed, and when Diana laughed she was very beautiful.

"You are so queer, Elsie," she said. "Do I dislike Barbara. at all? Perhaps ...no, I think I just don't like her. She is a charming girl, but somehow we do not harmonize ...we swear at each other like purple and pink. I am the pink. She hates poetry and I adore it. She loves hunting and golf; I like motoring and tennis. I am constitutionally lazy and she is amazonically robust and

energetic. Why this interrogation—has Willie been rhapsodizing over Barbara?"

Lady Widdicombe seated herself in the big settee.

"I was just thinking—I saw you had a letter from Mrs. Crewe-Sanders this morning—I had one too. Did she tell you—"

Diana nodded and there was a twinkle in her fine eyes.

"Now I know why you mention Barbara—she was staying with the Crewe-Sanders."

Lady Widdicombe protested, a little feebly.

"Barbara was staying with them," the girl went on teasingly, "and she was staying with the Colebrooks when Mrs. Carter lost her plaque, and she was a guest of the Fairholms when Lady Fairholm lost herplaque."

"Diana!"

"Oh yes, I know. But it is true, isn't it? And isn't this true also," the smile left the girl's face and she spoke slowly, "that all those beastly anonymous letters from 'A Candid Friend' are addressed to people who are known to Barbara May?"

Lady Widdicombe rose.

"Really, Diana, I never dreamt that you could be so uncharitable! They are our friends, too. I don't think you know what you are saying; you are suggesting that Barbara is not only a thief but a—"

"I know," Diana nodded sadly, "it is a rotten suggestion, but we are faced with the irresistible logic of facts."

Lady Widdicombe snorted.

"Facts! Preposterous!... blackening a girl's character... an innocent girl... now I know that you hate her!"

Diana shook her golden head, and again her eyes lit with amusement.

"Really, I don't; and really I'm not doing anything more hateful than exercising my latent qualities of detection."

She jumped up suddenly, put her arm about her cousin's waist and kissed her.

"Forgive me, Elsie," she wheedled, "I'm a pig and Barbara only bores me."

But Lady Widdicombe required a great deal of mollification.

For this was the sting in Diana's suspicions, that she herself had been struck by the same remarkable coincidence.

CHAPTER II

AUXILIARY Inspector Jack Danton turned into the office of the Second Commissioner perfectly certain in his own mind as to the reason his chief had re-called him urgently from Paris.

On the way up from Dover he had read all the newspaper accounts of the latest adventure of the mysterious jewel thief, with whose activities the local police were, apparently, quite unable to cope.

It was a job after Jack's own heart. He was one of the new police: the type that had found its way to Scotland Yard from the commissioned ranks of the Army, and although he had already to his credit a wholly meritorious capture of warehouse thieves, the real big case had not as yet come along. And here it was!

The story of the last jewel theft was an exact replica of all the earlier robberies. Mrs. Crewe-Sanders had a house-party. The jewel (a diamond plaque with a centre composed of three triangular emeralds) had been stolen on the night before the majority of the house party had dispersed.

That was the story he expected to hear repeated when he walked into his chief's office.

"Sit down, Danton," nodded the chief, "I want you rather badly."

Jack smiled.

"I think I know why, sir," he said. "That last theft seems to have been a particularly daring one."

He saw the chief frown, and wondered.

"What are you talking about?" asked the Commissioner, and it was Jack Danton's turn to be puzzled.

"I am referring to the Crewe-Sanders jewel robbery in Shropshire," he said.

"Oh, that!" The Commissioner shrugged his shoulders. "It is the 'Candid Friend' I am looking for rather than the burglar, and, anyway, the local police have not asked for our assistance."

Jack laughed.

"I am all at sea, sir; I don't even know who the Candid Friend is!"

The chief consulted some papers on the desk before him.

"The Candid Friend," he said slowly, "is an anonymous letter writer who has been directing his or her attention to some of the best people in society. The result of this scoundrel's activities has been disastrous. Whoever the writer is, he or she knows some of the grisly secrets which certain society people hide within their breasts, and which, I suppose, they firmly believed would never be dragged into the light of day. Honestly, I think the writer is a woman. The letters are in a woman's handwriting, disguised, but undoubtedly feminine. Here is one."

He passed a letter across the table, and Jack read it with a little grimace of disgust.

"That is rather poisonous," he said. "To whom was it addressed?"

"It was sent to the Earl of Widdicombe and it deals, as you see, with the Countess of Widdicombe and a supposed indiscretion. Happily, Lord Widdicombe is an intelligent, well-balanced man, with absolute faith in Lady Widdicombe, to whom the letter has been shown, and who has sent it to us. I want you to go down into Shropshire; you will have the entrée to the best houses—and probably you would have it without my assistance. You know the county?"

"Very well indeed, sir," said Jack with a half-smile. "As a matter of fact, the Widdicombes are old friends of mine, and I have already been asked down."

Now that the disappointment of what he had considered to be the more exciting task had passed away, Jack looked forward with considerable interest to a stay in his beloved Shropshire.

He took the available data into his office, and spent the morning comparing the various handwritings in the letters which the Commissioner had collected. Then he put them down and sat for some time thinking.

"Shropshire," he mused.

And Barbara May came from Shropshire. The thought of her made him glance at the clock and rise hurriedly. There was a chance—the dimmest chance—that she was riding in the Row that morning. That chance had taken him a dozen times to watch the riders, and eleven times he had been disappointed; he would probably be disappointed again, he thought, but nevertheless, he would take the chance.

A taxi dropped him at Hyde Park Corner, and he strolled along the crowded path, his eyes searching the equestrians. Suddenly his heart gave a little leap. Near the rail, and talking to a man whom he recognized as a Member

of Parliament, was the girl he sought. She sat astride a big black horse, a beautiful, virile figure.

"Why, Mr. Danton," she said, bending down to give him her gloved hand; "I thought you were in Paris."

"I thought I was too, yesterday morning," he said good-humouredly, "but my—er—people wired me to come back."

He had had many talks with Barbara May; in fact they had first met at Lady Widdicombe's house in town, but not once had he confided to her the nature of his profession. She for her part, evinced very little curiosity.

He knew that she was the daughter of a Foreign Office official, and that she herself had worked within that stately mansion during the war. This, and the fact that she was very poor, and that Lady Widdicombe was looking for a desirable match, were the only facts that he knew about her, save this: that every time he met her he grew more and more impatient for their next meeting.

"You swore you would come riding with me," said Barbara May accusingly, "and now you have lost your opportunity, Mr. Danton; I am leaving town to-morrow."

She saw the look of dismay on his face and laughed.

"I am going down into Shropshire," she said; "the Widdicombes are having their 'week.' Are you coming?"

He heaved a deep sigh of relief. For once duty and pleasure went hand in hand.

"Yes, curiously enough I am leaving for the Widdicombe's place to-morrow evening—we shall have that ride yet!"

She nodded.

"Have you been in town all the time?"

For a second she hesitated.

"No. I have been staying at Morply Castle with Mrs. Crewe-Sanders."

He stared at her for a second.

"The lady who lost the jewellery?"

It seemed to him that a queer look came into the girl's eyes, and that her colour deepened.

"Yes," she said shortly; and then, with a curt nod, turned her horse's head and rode away, leaving him staring after her.

Had he said anything to annoy her? That was the last thing in the world he desired. He had never known her so touchy before. So she had been at Morply Castle when the plaque was stolen. It was a thousand pities, he thought regretfully, that he had not been put on that job; he would have been frantically interested in hearing the story of the crime from the girl.

Danton went back to Scotland Yard with an uncomfortable feeling, though he failed to analyse the cause of his discomfort. Usually any such vague irritation can be traced to a cause, but Jack was wholly incapable of finding a reason for his present perturbation.

He was in the midst of his work that afternoon when there came a diversion. The telephone rang and the Chief Commissioner's voice hailed him.

"Whilst you are at the Widdicombe's—keep an eye open for the Plaque Fiend. I have an idea he will pay you a visit."

He heard the Commissioner laugh as he hung up the receiver, and wondered why.

CHAPTER III

JACK went home to his flat that afternoon and arranged to leave the following morning for Shropshire. In the evening he dined alone, returning home by the longest route, for he needed the exercise before he went to bed. His way took him down Piccadilly, on the park side of that thoroughfare, and his mind was completely occupied with Barbara May. The girl exercised an influence upon him which at once annoyed and amused him. He was not a particularly susceptible character; he was puzzled to discover what quality there was in her which other girls did not possess, which had so completely centred all his interests to one woman.

Nearing Constitution Hill he passed a large limousine which was drawn up by the kerb. He merely glanced at it, but in that one glimpse he saw something that made him check in his walk. The light from the street standard threw a ray into the dark interior of the car, and by that light he recognized Barbara May. There was no mistaking her; he would have known her amongst a million.

She was talking to somebody, earnestly, seriously; and who that somebody was Jack could not see.

He continued his walk; apparently she had not noticed him. A queer little sense of restriction crept into his heart at the natural conclusion he drew. Barbara May had a love affair and liked somebody well enough to meet them in this clandestine fashion. And yet³/₄ Barbara May was poor³/₄ the car was a luxurious one.

He waited fifty yards farther along the road, standing in the shadow of the railings. It was hateful of him to spy on her, but he was very human and wished to know who was the man to whom Barbara granted such privileges.

Presently the door of the limousine opened and the man stepped out; he was middle-aged and stout. Moreover, he was respectful, and from that tone in his voice Jack gathered that his first conclusion had been unjust.

"Very good, miss," said the man, "I will let you know in the morning."

Almost immediately the car moved off, and the man, raising his hat, stood for a moment before he turned and walked briskly in the direction where Jack was standing. He turned down Constitution Hill, crossing the road so that he followed the line of the wall which surrounded Buckingham Palace.

Jack, without any particular idea as to what he was going to do, followed in his wake. He was wearing rubber-soled shoes which made little or no sound.

Once the man glanced back uneasily as though he had some suspicion that he was being followed, but he held on his way. He was nearing the Victoria Memorial when the surprising thing happened. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief; but he pulled out something else, and Jack heard it fall with a clatter on the gravel walk. He stooped and picked it up as the man turned with an exclamation. It was a square leather jewel case, and, in falling, the snap had unfastened, and as Jack handled it the lid flew open.

Instantly the man turned.

"That's mine!" he said roughly, and he would have snatched it away, but Jack was gazing in dumbfounded horror upon a great diamond cluster in the centre of which were three large emeralds. It was Mrs. Crewe-Sanders's missing jewel.

He could not believe it possible, and yet³/₄ Barbara May was a thief and this man was the receiver!

"Come on, I want my property."

The stout man tried to snatch it from him but Jack was too quick for him.

"You'll have to explain where you got this, my friend," he said.

"I'll explain nothing," snapped the other. "If you don't hand it to me I shall call a policeman."

"Then call me," said Jack, and he saw the stout man start.

"I don't understand you."

"I'm Inspector Danton of Scotland Yard," said Jack, "and I think there are a few explanations due from you. Will you walk with me to the nearest police station?"

The fellow hesitated.

"Certainly," he said after a while, and they walked side by side in silence.

Jack's dilemma was a cruel one. The arrest of this man meant inevitably the exposure of the girl, and he only now realized how strong a hold she had upon his heart. But he had his duty to do; that came first and foremost in his mind. He set his teeth to the task; he must go through with it.

In the Westminster Police Station the prisoner described himself as John Smith, refused to give any explanation as to how the property came into his possession, and stood silently in the steel pen whilst Jack and the sergeant discussed the recovered property.

"There is no doubt about it at all, sir," said the sergeant, consulting a list. "This is the jewel the lady lost; you'll prefer a charge against him, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Jack.

He was sick at heart; he dare not even question his prisoner as to how the jewel came into his possession. He must have time to think 'matters out.

"I am going to the Chief Commissioner at his club," he said. "Detain him until I return, and keep that piece of jewellery locked up."

He walked to Pall Mall, and walked slowly. Some solution would come to him, perhaps³/₄ some way out for Barbara.

His brain was a confusion of thought, and he was slowly ascending the steps of the New Carlton Club before he could put two consecutive thoughts together.

To his surprise the Commissioner was waiting in the vestibule.

"Come into the smoking room, Danton," he said slowly, and Jack obeyed, wondering how his chief had come to know of the impending visit.

His first words explained.

"I have had a 'phoned message from the Westminster Police Station about the arrest of Smith," he said. "After you left a friend of the man's arrived and explained to my satisfaction that the jewellery found on the man is his legitimate property. He is a jeweller and had been to show the plaque to a friend."

Jack listened, incredulous, dumbfounded, but vastly relieved.

"But it answered the description³/₄ " he began.

The Police Commissioner interrupted him.

"I know³/₄ it was an exact copy of the plaque which Streetley sold to Mrs. Crewe-Sanders. In fact, the man you arrested was one of Streetley's managers."

Jack could say nothing.

He was too grateful to know that his suspicions of Barbara May were unfounded to care about his own faux pas.

"And by the way, Danton," the Chief Commissioner looked at his cigar thoughtfully, "that little joke of mine about keeping an eye open for the jewel thief at Lord Widdicombe's was $\frac{3}{4}$ well, it was a. joke. I've got the matter of the thief-in-the-night well in hand, and if you interfered you might spoil everything."

"I see, sir," said Jack, though in truth he saw nothing

CHAPTER IV

"SOCIETY," said the Countess of Widdicombe in her severest manner, "will more readily forgive a theft than a slander."

Diana laughed.

"Which shows how thoroughly immoral society is," she said lightly.

She sat swaying her fan, her eyes fixed upon the floor of the ballroom below, crowded with dancing couples.

Lady Widdicombe's dances during the cricket week attracted the whole county, and outside in the drive the waiting motor-cars reached from the lodge gates to the hospitable doors of High Felsham.

"Mrs. Crewe-Sanders tells me," said Diana, still watching the glittering throng below, "that nobody except a person acquainted with the ins and outs of Morply Castle could have got in."

"She was the chief sufferer," said Lady Widdicombe, and Diana laughed—and when Diana laughed, her delicate face was singularly beautiful.

"The poor dear woman so plasters herself with diamonds that the wonderful thing to me is that she has missed any at all!" she said. "The curious thing is that though there were a lot of other guests, and diamonds in galore, the thief took nobody's property but hers."

"I could forgive that," said Lady Widdicombe reverting to her pet topic, "but the 'Candid Friend' business is unpardonable. Any kind of anonymous letter-writer is contemptible, but an anonymous letter-writer who works wholesale, and who takes a wicked and malicious delight in breaking hearts and ruining lives—there is no punishment too severe for her."

"Why her?" asked Diana curiously.

"Because a man wouldn't do such a thing," said Lady Widdicombe.

Diana's fan waved slowly.

"I've known some men who would do most things," she mused, and turned her head to answer the greeting of the girl who came swinging along the gallery to where they were sitting.

"Hello, Barbara May," she said lazily. "Aren't you dancing?"

In her evening gown Barbara was good to look upon, for she was in the first flush and beauty of womanhood. Her laughing eyes fell upon Lady Diana.

"Aren't you afraid to wear your diamonds, Diana," she said, nodding to the plaque that sparkled on Diana's white dress.

"No, I don't think our burglar will come here."

"Do you want me, dear?" asked Lady Widdicombe.

"I wanted to tell you that I'd changed my room."

"Oh, that's good of you," said Lady Widdicombe gratefully. "You are sure you don't mind?"

"Not a bit," laughed the girl.

"One of Widdicombe's innumerable cousins has been taken ill," explained Lady Widdicombe, "and Barbara most kindly offered to change rooms with her."

Her eyes followed the girl admiringly as she swept down the gallery.

"By the way," she said. "Barbara told me that the mysterious 'Candid Friend' had written a perfectly horrible note about her to one of her relations."

"She seems to bear up very well," said Diana smiling.

"I think it is abominable," said Lady Widdicombe angrily; "abominable! The person who writes those kind of letters should be tarred and feathered."

In the spacious library, which had been turned into a smoke-room for the night, the Morply burglary and the activities of the "Candid Friend" were the principal topics of conversation. Lord Widdicombe, a tall, thin, dyspeptic man with a sense of humour which so few dyspeptics possess, had already held forth on the iniquity of the anonymous letter-writer.

Whoever was this devilish mischief-maker, he or she had already worked havoc in three homes, and the poison was working in a fourth under their very eyes. It was on the subject of the burglary that Lord Widdicombe was most entertaining, for, as usual, he found something in these crimes to remind him of his Indian experiences, and the Earl of Widdicombe on India was worth going a long way to hear.

"Diamonds?" he said. "Well, I suppose he takes diamonds because they're most marketable. When I was Governor of Bombay there was staged one of

the most sensational diamond robberies which, had it succeeded, would have landed the British Government in a devil of a mess. You've heard of the Kali Diamond? I bet you haven't, though," he chuckled. "Well, it's a very famous stone, of no great size, and worth one to a few hundred pounds intrinsically. As a matter of fact, a million wouldn't buy it, because on one of the facets is engraved by some extraordinary native mechanic a whole verse from one of the sacred books. The microscopic character of the writing and the difficulty of the engraving you may imagine, and it is not wonderful that the natives believe that this inscription is of divine origin.

"There had been one or two attempts to steal the stone and at last the British Government intervened, knowing that if this thing was missing there would be trouble in the Province. They took charge of the stone, which has to be shown on one of their holy days—I think it is next month some time—in fact, I am sure. Well, this infernal jewel was guarded with the greatest care. Nevertheless, a gang of native burglars broke into the vault where it was deposited and got away with it. It happened a week or two before the ceremony which is called 'The Showing of the Stone,' and everybody connected with the Government were in a cold sweat of fear. Happily, we managed to get in touch with the rascally robbers but it cost us the greater part of a hundred thousand pounds to restore it."

"I suppose you let it be pretty well known that the stone was missing?"

"Good Lord, no," said his lordship, aghast at the idea. "Let the people know that their sacred stone had gone? That would have been the most lunatic proceeding. No, we kept it as quiet as possible. We dare not breathe a word about the loss, for rumour runs fast in the shiny East."

Barbara May had strayed into the smoke-room, and, going up behind a young man, touched him on the shoulder. He turned round with a start.

"I'm awfully sorry," he apologized. "I was listening to a most engrossing story."

He led her out into the ballroom, and a few seconds later they were two-stepping to the plebeian strains of "Whose Little Baby Are You?"

CHAPTER V

"DO you know, Mr. Danton, I've been thinking an awful lot about you," said Barbara May, as the band finished with a crash and they walked out on to the terrace.

"I'm sorry I've been responsible for so much mental activity," said Jack.

"I've been wondering what is your job. Everybody knows that you have some mysterious employment—and now I've got it."

"The dickens you have!" he said coolly, sitting down by her side. "And what am I?"

"You're a policeman."

His look of dismay made her gurgle with laughter.

"Do I really look like a policeman?" he said.

"Not like an ordinary policeman, but very much like one of those very smart ex-officers who are joining the special branch just now."

"If I really was a policeman," he bantered, "I should feel that I had made a very bad beginning."

"But you are, aren't you?" she insisted.

"If I wasn't a policeman I should be very annoyed; and I couldn't possibly be annoyed with you, Miss May."

"The question is," she said, knitting her brows, "are you after the 'Candid Friend' or a bad, bold burglar?"

"Would Scotland Yard move in the matter of the 'Candid Friend' unless complaints had been made?"

"That's true," she replied. "Then you are after the bad, bold burglar, Mopley Mike."

"Do they call him that?" he said in surprise.

"I call him that," she said solemnly. "I almost wished you were after the 'Candid Friend.' I wonder who she is?"

"You think it is a woman, then?"

"Well," said Barbara May, shrugging her shapely shoulders, "'Cat' is written in every line of them, and they are really horribly wicked. You know she has parted the Flatterleys, and that Tom Fowler is suing for a divorce, and that Mrs. Slee has gone abroad—it is killing her mother."

He nodded gravely.

"I think that sort of crime is abominable," he said, unconsciously echoing Lady Widdicombe's words; "I can respect a burglar, but a slanderer—a person who stabs in the back—must be an obnoxious beast."

As she was going up to her room that night Barbara May saw Jack talking earnestly to Lord Widdicombe and smiled within herself.

"What is amusing you, Barbara May?" drawled Diana who was coming up the stairs behind her.

"Thoughts," said Barbara May.

"You're lucky to be able to smile," said Diana. "At the end of one of these evenings I am bored cold—bored to weariness—bored wide awake, if you can understand."

Barbara May turned and faced the girl squarely.

"Why do you come?" she asked quietly.

Diana's shoulders rose.

"One must do something," she said.

"Why don't, you work?" was the brutal question, and Diana shrank delicately.

She was the heiress of one of the richest landowners in the kingdom, as Barbara well knew.

Had Lady Widdicombe seen the two girls at that moment, she would have realized that the antagonism between them was not one-sided.

"What do you call work?" drawled Diana. "To join a nursing institution, or become a Foreign Office clerk or something?"

"Both of which I have done, said Barbara May, "and both are excellent sedatives. My experience is that the useless day produces the sleepless night."

"Barbara May," said the other with a laugh, "aren't you just a little—er—priggishly capable?"

"Don't taunt me with my usefulness." smiled Barbara.

Even the astute Mr. Jack Danton, had he overheard this conversation, could not have guessed that that scene on the stairs had been as carefully rehearsed and forced upon Diana as though Barbara May had spent the morning in teaching her her lines. For Barbara May had gone up those stairs, just a little ahead of Diana, determined to annoy her, and as determined to apologize for her rudeness.

Diana was in the hands of her maid when there came a knock at the bedroom door and Barbara came in.

"Diana, I've come to say that I'm so sorry I was rude to you," she said.

"My dear," smiled Diana sweetly, "it was quite my fault; I think one gets just a little over-tired about this time in the morning."

"What a beautiful room you have, and what wonderful brushes!" Barbara May admired the set upon the dressing-table. "If I have any fault to find with this room, the ceiling is a little low," she rattled on.

"I sleep with my windows open," said Diana, amused at the other's interest in trifling affairs.

"In spite of the burglar?"

"There isn't much danger, is there?"

Barbara looked out of the window.

"A man could hardly walk along this parapet," she said. "Your room is a good thirty feet from the ground."

She said good night and was at the door when she turned.

"Would you like a cup of chocolate?" she asked.

Now, Diana's weakness was for chocolate, as Barbara May well knew, but she was amazed at the invitation. The girl laughed.

"I've just made some in my room," she said. "I have an electric kettle and I'm supposed to make chocolate rather well."

"I should love some. I'll send Amile for it."

"It will be ready in three minutes," said Barbara. "Are you sure you've forgiven me?"

"If I hadn't forgiven you before, I should fall on your neck now," said Diana with a laugh.

And it really was delicious chocolate. Diana sat up in bed, a dainty, beautiful picture, and sipped the hot and fragrant fluid, and felt as near friendly to Barbara May as it was possible for her to feel. She finished the cup and handed it to the maid.

"I will put the light out and lock the door, Amile," she said. "Good night. I think I shall sleep."

Barbara May thought Diana would sleep too. She replaced a tiny bottle half-full of colourless liquid, which she had taken from her dressing-case, and looked at her watch. Then she threw up the window. Her room was on the same floor as Diana's and between her and the girl was an empty suite. She pulled down the blinds and undressed. From her wardrobe she took a pair of riding breeches, put them on and pulled thick woollen stockings over the silken hose. She stuffed her arms into a jersey coat, put out the light and sat down to wait.

At two o'clock she let the blinds up noiselessly and climbed out of the window on to the parapet. It was no more than twelve inches wide, but this girl had nerves like steel, and she walked without faltering along the narrow ledge.

A slip, and nothing could have saved her from death, but she did not hesitate. She came abreast of Diana's window and without a pause crept in. Diana was sleeping heavily, and Barbara May stepped to the side of the bed and listened. Her breathing was regular, and she did not move when Barbara laid her

hand gently on her shoulder. The drug she had put into the chocolate had done its work most effectively, and she could, without danger, have switched on the lights, save that it might attract attention from anybody passing along the corridor who would have seen the gleam of light in the room.

She took an electric torch from her pocket and a small bunch of keys. She had only come into the room to apologize to Diana to discover just where Diana put her jewel case. The lock of the steel-lined box yielded after the third attempt and Barbara May made her selection, which was the plaque which had sparkled on Diana's breast. She was not, however, satisfied with this inspection and pursued certain investigations. They were well rewarded.

Her work finished, she hesitated. Very carefully she unlocked the door and peeped out. Only a dim light was burning in the corridor. Should she risk it? Lord Widdicombe employed a night-watchman, but Barbara heard his cough in the hall below.

She closed Diana's door behind her and walked swiftly up the corridor to her own room, and was at the door, her hand on the handle, when she heard the swish of feet on the carpeted stairs. She turned the handle and could have screamed in her vexation. She had locked the door before she went through the window. She remembered it now, and raged at her folly. There was just one chance. It was that the door of the empty suite was open, and she ran quickly, though it was toward the stairs. The door yielded to her touch—and only in time. From where she stood closing the door she could see the back of a man's head coming up to the last landing on the stairs. It was Jack Danton.

She closed the door softly, and went to the window which, fortunately, was open. Her nerves were shaken, she discovered, when she again reached her perilous foothold, but she came to her own room without mishap.

From her trunk—the trunk which she had forbidden her maid to unlock—she took out a square black box of dull steel, and to this she added various articles which she laid on the table. From the steel box ran a long flex, to the end of which was attached a wooden plug, which she fitted into one of the electric light brackets. For two hours she worked, and as the light of dawn showed in the eastern sky she went out through the window, traversing the perilous parapet to Diana's room. She was back in five minutes and, putting away her apparatus, she carefully packed the diamond plaque in a small cardboard box and placed it under her pillow.

CHAPTER VI

BARBARA was one of the first down next morning, a cool healthy figure in grey; and Jack who had just come in from his morning stroll seemed to be the only other guest about.

"Good-morning, Miss May, you're a very early riser," he greeted her.

"Aren't I," she said. "But there isn't much virtue in early rising, you know. The worm is an earlier riser, or the bird wouldn't have got him."

They strolled out again on to the drive and stood looking across the glorious landscape at the meadow-land that sloped down to the river and the forest of lordly oaks which crowned the ridge on the far side of the Stour.

"It's good to be alive," said Barbara May.

"I wish I had sufficient energy to walk to the post office."

"I'll encourage you," said Barbara May, "wait till I get my hat."

They swung down the drive together, past the lodge gates and through the quaint village street. Jack had a sealed packet to send.

"A report to his chief," thought Barbara.

They had left the shop when suddenly she stopped.

"I must get some stamps," she said and turned back. "No, don't come with me; I won't be a second."

She walked back into the shop and drew a packet from the pocket of her sports coat.

"This is to be expressed," she said, "it is stamped and weighed."

"Very good, miss," said the postmaster.

He examined the address and dropped the packet into a bag.

"I'm capricious and decided not to buy any stamps at all," she said as she rejoined Jack. "I feared to keep you waiting, as the masculine temper before breakfast is notoriously savage."

"When are you going to London?" he asked.

"This afternoon, I think," she replied.

"I would have gone this morning, but it would have looked so suspicious leaving the house, supposing a burglar had come—and one doesn't know whether there has been a burglar until all these lazy people wake up."

He smiled.

"I don't think there was a burglar last night," he said rashly.

They went into breakfast together and found Lord and Lady Widdicombe were down. Two or three other guests strolled in.

"Where's Diana?" asked Lord Widdicombe, attacking a kidney.

"Diana. doesn't wake till twelve," said Lady Widdicombe. "Surely you know that."

"I wish Diana would take a little more cheerful view of things," grumbled his lordship, with whom Diana was no great favourite, though she was ward and cousin.

Diana did not, in fact, wake until one o'clock, and she woke feeling exceptionally refreshed. She had slept the clock round and that was really an unusual experience for her.

"I must get Barbara to give me the recipe for that chocolate," she said as she sipped her morning tea, whilst her maid prepared her bath. "Are there any letters, Amile?"

A budget of letters was placed on the coverlet, and Diana glanced through them. Half-an-hour later she was dressed. She wore during the day a pearl necklace and her rings, and she unlocked her little strong-box to get these, and stared into the interior with a white face.

"Amile, quickly," she called. "Where is my plaque?"

"You put it into the box last night. I saw you."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain, madame," said the agitated maid.

Diana made a quick search. No other jewellery was missing, though there was an emerald ring in the box which was worth a fortune. Only the diamonds! She rang the bell and then, remembering she was dressed, she ran down the stairs and met Lord Widdicombe in the hall.

"Willie," she said rapidly, "somebody has taken my diamond plaque."

"Oh damn!" said Lord Widdicombe. He caught the eye of the young man talking to Barbara May, and Danton came across.

"Diana has been robbed of a diamond plaque," said Lord Widdicombe in a low voice. "I wish you'd see her and search the rooms."

His search produced no results. The plaque had gone, and Jack, greatly perturbed, joined his lordship in the library.

"I can't understand it," he said. "She tells me that she always locks her door at night and leaves the key on the inside. This morning the door was locked."

"Could it be unlocked by an instrument used outside?"

"I tried that," said Danton, "and I found it is impossible."

"Then how the devil could it have happened?" demanded the exasperated peer. "Didn't Diana hear any kind of noise?"

"None whatever," said Jack; "and it is obviously impossible to get into the house from the outside unless one of the guests occupying a room on the same floor walked along the parapet."

"That's unlikely. He would want the nerve of a steeplejack to do that."

"There's no doubt about the nerve of the gentleman who's stolen this plaque," said Jack grimly. "I can only suggest that you see the guests and put the matter before them, and say that it is possible that one of the servants may have taken the plaque and concealed it in his mistress's or master's room. Under those circumstances, they will not object to a search."

"That is a good idea," nodded his lordship, and proceeded to interview his guests, who readily acquiesced.

The search, conducted ostensibly by Lord Widdicombe, but in reality by Jack who had "volunteered to help," was thorough but fruitless.

Diana, revelling in an unaccustomed atmosphere of sympathy, treated the matter lightly. "I don't mind the loss of the plaque, because it is insured," she said. "It was a beautiful thing. I only bought it a month ago from Streetley's."

"That's queer," said Widdicombe with a frown.

His wife looked at him in surprise.

"What is that, Widdicombe?" she asked.

"Why, that Crewe-Sanders woman who lost her diamonds had only bought them a month or so before at Streetley's."

"Well, that is not remarkable," said a guest.

They were taking tea in the big drawing-room in the afternoon when the exchange of views occurred.

"Streetley's is the biggest of the fashionable jewellers, and I suppose half the stuff one sees women wearing came from that firm."

"What I worry about," said Diana, bringing attention back to her own misfortune, "is the knowledge that this wretched man was in my room whilst I was asleep."

"I wonder he had the heart to do it, Diana," said his lordship sarcastically, and then seriously: "I'm very annoyed it has happened. I thought we should get through our week without this kind of trouble."

"I wonder the thief had the heart to do it," said Diana sarcastically.

CHAPTER VII

JACK made a very complete search of the grounds, particularly in the vicinity of the mansion. Beneath Diana's window he looked for the tell-tale marks of

a ladder, but there were none to be found.

All the time he was searching he had the certainty in his mind that the crime had been committed from the inside of the house. Who was there to suspect? Strangely enough, he had already ruled out the possibility of a servant being responsible for the robbery. Most of the guests had brought their own maids; but they were housed in a part of the building which made it impossible that they could reach Diana's room in the middle of the night.

He came back in a troubled frame of mind to interview Lord Widdicombe. His lordship was pacing his library when the detective entered.

"Well, Danton," he said, "have you discovered anything?"

Jack shook his head.

"Nothing," he said.

Widdicombe resumed his pacing.

"I wish to heaven it hadn't happened," he said. "Diana can well afford the loss—she is very rich. It is the thought that it is somebody in this house, a guest possibly, who is the thief that bothers me. When are you going back to town?" he asked suddenly.

"To-day. I thought of going back by the same train as Miss May."

Lord Widdicombe frowned.

"Barbara May, eh?" he said, "a very nice girl, and a very unfortunate girl, too," he added significantly.

"What do you mean?" asked Jack, alert to defend where no defence was called for.

"Unfortunate, because she has been in every house where as burglary has been committed. In other words, Danton, whenever this mysterious visitor has come, Barbara May has been a guest. "Wait, wait," he said, holding up his hand, "I am not suggesting that Barbara knows anything about this wretched thief—that would be too preposterous a suggestion; but there is

the fact. It has been rubbed into me by Diana, and you can't get away from 'it, Danton."

Jack shrugged.

"For the matter of that, Miss Wold has been at most of the places where the burglaries have been committed."

"By jove! so she has," said Lord Widdicombe thoughtfully; "but, pshaw! I don't think we need consider either Diana or Barbara. Now, the point that strikes me—and I am not a detective—is: if the thief is a guest in this house the jewel must be in this house still. Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Jack.

"Unless," said Lord Widdicombe slowly, "they have managed to get it away."

"That presupposes a confederate," said Jack Danton, "and I have an idea that the thief is playing a lone hand."

"Either a confederate, or else the plaque has been—well, posted."

Jack laughed.

"They must have got up very early," he said. "The only person who went to the post-office in the first part of the morning was myself." He stopped suddenly. Barbara also had been to the post-office, and—

"Nobody else?" asked Lord Widdicombe curiously.

"Nobody," said Jack.

He got away from his host as soon as he could. He must settle this torturous suspicion which was disturbing his mind. Barbara May! It was impossible.

As soon as he could get away, he went to the post-office and found the old post-master making up his books.

"Mr. Villers, as a servant of the Government, you will understand that what I tell you is very confidential."

He passed his card across the counter, and the old man, fixing his glasses, read, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"I had no idea, sir, you were in the police," he said. "I've got a nephew—"

But Jack cut short the recital of his relative's qualities.

"Mr. Villers, can you tell me how many registered parcels have been despatched from the post-office to-day?"

"None, sir," said the old man promptly, "not a single one."

Jack heaved a sigh of relief.

"And the letters, of course, you could not keep track of?"

"No, sir; the only one I know anything about is an express letter which was handed in early this morning."

"By whom?" asked Jack quickly.

"By that young lady, Miss May, I think her name is."

The heart of Jack Danton sank.

"Are you sure?"

"Why, yes, sir; she came in with you early this morning, and then she came back and said she had forgotten she had the letter to send."

He remembered now that Barbara had said she was going back to buy some stamps.

"What sort of letter was it?" he asked, feeling a little sick at heart.

"Well, it was a pretty bulky letter, sir; it felt to me as though there was a cardboard box inside."

"To where was it addressed? I suppose you don't remember that?" asked Jack quickly.

"Yes, I do, sir; I took a note of it, because it was an unusual thing to send an express letter from here."

He turned up a book.

"It was sent to Mr. Singh, 903 Bird-in-Bush Road, Peckham. That's what made me notice the address particularly; I never knew there was such a road in London."

Jack jotted down the address mechanically.

Singh! An Indian name. He frowned, and tried to associate this circumstance with something he had heard only recently. He must know the

truth, he felt, as he walked slowly back to the house, for her sake and for his. He realized now all that Barbara May meant to him, all the high hopes that had been planted in his heart, and whilst he could not bring himself to believe that the girl was a common thief, yet every new fact which was disclosed went to sup-

port that view. The meeting she had had with the mysterious Mr. Smith at Hyde Park Corner, the discovery that he had in his possession a diamond plaque similar to that which had been stolen—this was a damning confirmation of his worst fears.

Diana Wold treated the matter of her loss very lightly; she strolled into Barbara May's room and watched her packing.

"The world's sympathy is very precious to me," she said cheerfully, "it is almost worth the loss of my plaque."

"I don't believe that," smiled Barbara.

"What a tremendous lot of baggage you bring," said Diana interested. "That great box and two suit-cases; really, Barbara, you are equipped for a world tour."

"Aren't I," laughed the girl, and then Lady Diana smelt something. It was a fragrant and peculiar perfume. What was more, it was a perfume which was made especially for her.

"Excuse me if I sniff," she said. "What scent is that Barbara?"

"Scent," said Barbara in surprise, and then slowly, "I have noticed it before. I never use any other perfume than lavender water."

Diana changed the subject, and a few minutes after went back to her own room and rang for her maid.

"Amile, where is my perfume?"

"You put it in your jewel case, madame," said the girl.

Diana unlocked the little steel box and, putting in her hand, brought out a squat cut-glass bottle. She knew before she touched it that the stopper was out, and feeling gingerly on the bottom of the box she found it was damp.

"I remember now," she said slowly, "I put it away in a hurry, and I must have spilt a little. That will do, Amile."

She sat down on the bed to think.

So it was Barbara May whose hand had been inside that box: Barbara May who—suddenly Diana went white and, unlocking the little safe again, she took some papers out and examined them. They were all there. She sighed her relief. All there, but they reeked of her perfume. She carried the papers to the fireplace, put them in and set a match to them. As she watched the flames curl upwards there came to her the faint fragrance of the perfume with which they were saturated.

So Barbara May was the thief.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE said no more, and both Widdicombe and Jack Danton found her unusually quiet that afternoon.

After Barbara had gone up to her room to make her final preparations for her departure, Jack asked a question which had puzzled him. They were alone together in the big conservatory that looked out over the park.

"I can't understand, Miss Wold," he said, "how the thief could get into your room, unlock the door, and not disturb you. Are you a heavy sleeper?"

She shook her head.

"As a matter of fact, I am a very light sleeper," she said, and added deliberately, "probably it was Barbara May's chocolate which proved such an excellent sedative."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack quickly.

"Barbara brought me in a cup of chocolate before I went to sleep," said Diana carelessly. "We had a little quarrel, and this was her love-gift to make up," she added with a grim smile.

"What happened after?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Diana. "I know I must have fallen asleep immediately, and I must have

slept like a log. I did not wake until nearly lunch time, and I certainly heard nobody come into my room or leave it."

Jack Danton spoke very little on the way to town, and Barbara May, on the contrary, was unusually vivacious and gay.

He put her into a cab (the handsome car he had seen at Hyde Park Corner was evidently reserved for special occasions) and went to his diggings and changed. Half-an-hour later he was riding on top of a south-bound tram—car wondering what result his investigations would have. He made an inquiry of the conductor.

"Bird-in-Bush Road? Yes, sir; it is near the Canal Bridge in the Old Kent Road. I'll tell you when we get there."

The thoroughfare proved to be a long winding road of respectable middle-class houses. No. 903 was a corner house with a yellow stucco front, and

plaster half columns, which gave it the appearance curiously reminiscent of an Egyptian tomb.

He did not go to the house, but strolled up and down on the opposite side of the road. The place itself showed no sign of life. The garden was neglected and weed-grown; its windows had not received attention for months.

It was getting dark when a cab came rattling along the road, stopping some distance from the house. A girl alighted, and Jack's heart leapt, for he recognized without difficulty the trim figure of the woman he loved. She dismissed the cab and came along without hesitation, turning into the front garden, and he saw her walk up the half-a-dozen steps which led to the front door. She had hardly knocked before the door was opened.

The unknown occupant had been watching for her, thought Jack. What was happening there? He walked down the side street parallel with the garden of No. 903, and here he could obtain a view of the back of the house. The view, however, offered him no satisfaction, and he resumed his vigil along the side-walk of Bird-in-Bush Road. Presently the door opened and the girl came out. Nobody accompanied

her to the gate, and she turned and walked swiftly in the direction of the Old Kent Road. Should he follow her? He decided to wait a little while, and conduct a little private investigation. First, he must know who was the occupant of this house, and he waited until the girl was out of sight before he crossed and entered the unkempt garden.

His knock was not answered. He knocked again. Presently he heard soft footsteps in the passage, the rattling of chains, and the door opened a few inches to disclose a dark suspicious-looking face.

"Does Mr. Singh live here?"

"Yes, sir," answered the Indian in perfect English. "But he is engaged."

"I want to see him," said Jack impatiently.

"I will tell him, sir."

The man attempted to close the door, but Jack's foot formed a wedge which could not be overcome.

"You cannot come in," said the Indian agitatedly. "I will tell Mr. Singh you wish to see him, but you must wait outside."

"I'll wait inside," said Jack, and with a heave of his shoulders, pushed open the door.

So far he got when a door at the end of the passage opened and a man came out. He was not, as the detective had anticipated, an Indian, but a very matter of fact, commonplace European, respectably attired, and of excellent physique.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to see Mr. Singh."

"Well, you can't see him," said the other brusquely.

"I not only can, but will see him," said Jack savagely, and to his amazement the man laughed.

"I don't think I should try, Mr. Danton," he said, and Jack stared at him.

"You know me?"

"Oh, yes; you are Mr. Danton of Scotland Yard. I know you very well," said the other, evidently amused at the sensation he had created, "and I assure you that Mr. Singh is not able to see you because he is a very sick man. This English climate doesn't agree with him, and I have strict orders to see that he is not disturbed. And under any circumstances, Mr. Danton, you have no right to force your way into the house without a search warrant."

Which was so absolutely true that Jack felt extremely foolish.

"There is no question of a search Warrant," he said. "I merely want to ask a few questions."

"Those questions cannot be answered until—" the man hesitated, "until Mr. Singh is well enough to see you."

Thus the adventure ended—lop-sidedly, as he told himself, as he walked up the Street to catch a tram-car back to town.

He was turning the key to admit himself into his flat, when there flashed upon him the recollection of Lord Widdicombe's story. The Kali Diamond. That was why the Indian association had been familiar. But he had no sooner thought of this connection than he realized its absurdity. If the Kali Diamond were in England, he could understand Barbara May's activity and the reason why she was working hand-in-glove with the Indian Singh.

He tried all that night to find some logical and plausible explanation that would acquit Barbara May of any kind of complicity. And at the end he went to sleep with an aching head and a sense of despair.

CHAPTER IX

"READ this," said the Commissioner next morning, when Jack reported himself to headquarters.

The Detective Inspector took the letter. It was written on a grey paper that was strangely familiar to him.

"DEAR Sir, (it ran)

"I think it is only right that you should know that Inspector John Danton is working hand-in-glove with a jewel thief, who recently stole Miss Diana Wold's diamond plaque. He is not only working with her, but he is in love with her. The girl's name is Barbara May, who was a guest of Lord Widdicombe's on the night that the plaque was stolen. If you take the trouble to inquire, you will discover that she was a guest in every house where the plaques have been stolen.

"Yours truly,

"A CANDID FRIEND."

"Posted in London," said the Commissioner. "What have you got to say to that, Danton?"

Jack's face turned red and white.

"It is monstrous," he gasped.

"It is certainly unkind," said the Commissioner drily. "Do you know Miss May?"

"Very well indeed," said Jack stoutly, "and this is a disgraceful charge."

"What is there disgraceful about it? What is the most annoying thing about it? The suggestion that you are in love with her?" asked the other with a twinkle in his eye.

"The whole thing is dastardly," said Jack hotly, and the Commissioner nodded.

"Exactly," he said. "Your job is to find the writer of those letters. Diana Wold, by the way, has been the recipient of a scandalous epistle—she got me on the telephone a little time ago—and told me about it."

Jack examined the letter. The writing was obviously disguised, but it was the letter of an educated person.

"You were with the Widdicombes when the plaque was stolen?" the Commissioner went on. "Did you get any kind of a clue?"

Jack shook his head.

"No, sir," Jack lied, and tried to keep his eyes steady.

"Humph!" said the Commissioner, "anyway, it isn't your job. And, by the way, no word of these robberies is to be made public. We must keep the matter secret for reasons of our own."

Though it was not Jack's job, and he well knew it, he had an interest in the stealer of stones which the Commissioner could not guess, unless he gave credence to the malicious charge which the "Candid Friend" had made.

His first call that morning, after leaving Scotland Yard, was on Streetley's, the jewellers, and he was taken into the office of the proprietor, an elderly, saturnine man, who gave him a cold welcome.

"You quite understand, Mr. Streetley, that I am not officially engaged in the case," explained Jack, "but I have a personal interest, inasmuch as Lord Widdicombe is a friend of mine and I know Miss Diana Wold, who was the last person to lose her jewellery. It is common gossip that the plaques that have been stolen have been purchased from your firm within the last six months."

Mr. Streetley nodded.

"That is true," he said. "We are the biggest firm in London who sell and purchase cut diamonds, and we certainly have the most valuable selection of stones in Europe."

"Can you account for the fact that these plaques have been stolen? There is nobody who has an especial grudge against your firm?"

Old Streetley smiled.

"I can't see that they would be revenged upon us by stealing property which we have sold," he said.

"Then you can offer no explanation?"

"None whatever," said Mr. Streetley, and was evidently relieved that the interview was finished.

As he went. out of the big shop, Jack looked round for some sign of the man Smith, who was described as Streetley's manager. If he was on the premises, he was not visible.

He was not satisfied. He remembered that a friend of his, a very wealthy stock-broker, had told him a month or two ago that he had bought his wife a plaque at Streetley's. Probably she would be the next recipient of the burglar's. attention.

He called him up on the 'phone to find that he was not at his office. A second call he put through was more successful. Mr. Bordle was at home at his Park Lane flat, and to there Jack repaired.

"Come in, Danton," said the other heartily, "my wife's out of town. I've a touch of the 'flu, and I'm bored to death."

"And I am going to bore you a little more," smiled Jack. "Do you remember some time ago, Bordle, you

told me that you were buying your wife some jewellery at Streetley's."

The other nodded.

"That's perfectly true: I bought two plaques, one for my wife and one for my sister. I gave it to her as a wedding-present: she was getting married just about then. And the next time I get jewellery," he added with a little grimace, "I assure you it will not be at Streetley's!"

"Why?" asked Jack eagerly.

"Because they're fussy," said Bordle.

"We hadn't had the jewel a month before they sent a man to ask if we would return it because they had made some mistake about the setting and they wanted to put it right. As far as I could see, the setting was perfect, and my wife at first refused to send it back—so did my sister."

"They made the same request of her?" said Jack in surprise.

"That's so," said Bordle. "Anyway, we sent them back. They kept the darned things for nearly a month before they returned them, and so far as I could see, they had made no alteration whatever in the setting. They played the same trick with a fellow I know."

"Asked for the plaque back?" said Jack in surprise. "How many plaques do they sell in the course of a year?"

"Hundreds, I should think," said the other. "They're the best people in London for that kind of work; they're scrupulously honest, and they do not ask for a big profit, so they get a tremendous lot of custom. But why are you so interested?"

"If I tell you, you've to keep the facts as a secret," said Jack; "they have not yet been made public," and he explained the curious fate of all plaques which had been purchased at Streetley's.

"Well, they won't get mine," said Bordle with a laugh. "It is in the strong room at my bank. But I must warn my sister, Carrie."

CHAPTER X

THE Daily Telephone had an item of news the following morning which interested quite a number of people:

"It is an open secret that society has been greatly disturbed through the activities of an unknown letter-writer signing himself 'A Candid Friend.' The real secrets of society are well kept, and, until a few days ago, few people outside of an exclusive circle knew about this pestiferous correspondence, which has been going on now for nearly a year. Nobody has been spared the malignant attentions of this unknown scoundrel. In consequence, wives have been separated from husbands, whole families estranged, and there is at least one case of suicide traceable to the vicious writer of the letters. A painful feature is the apparent fact that the writer is himself a society man, and acquainted, and possibly on terms of friendship, with his victims. The police are sparing no effort to bring the miscreant to justice."

That afternoon, Mason, the star reporter of the Daily Telephone, walked into his chief's room, closing the door carefully behind him.

The editor looked up and nodded inquiringly.

"I've found a good story," said Mason, "and I got on to it quite by accident. Do you know that for some considerable time—for three months I believe—there have been a succession of jewel robberies, and that properties of the value of eighty thousand pounds have been stolen from various country houses?"

The editor frowned.

"I have never heard of it," he said, "there have been no police reports—"

"No, for some reason the robberies have been kept quiet. I rather fancy that the people who have been victimized suspect one of their own number."

"The police have circulated no description of the missing property?" asked the editor.

Mason shook his head.

"I got the story from a man who was making inquiries at Lord Widdicombe's place on quite another matter. One of the servants told him, and then begged him to say nothing because, apparently, they had all been sworn to secrecy."

"That's curious," said the editor, leaning back in his chair. "It sounds like a good story to me. Have you particulars of the other robberies?"

"Three of them," nodded Mason. "I have two or three reporters out making inquiries in other places, and I think, if we can get it confirmed from elsewhere, this ought to be a very big story indeed."

He went back to his own room, and all that afternoon there came to him scraps of information that enabled him to piece together a story which promised to be sensational. In one respect he drew blank. Scotland Yard knew nothing of the robberies; or, if they knew, for their own purpose declined to make a statement. It was not remarkable, because Scotland Yard sometimes resents newspaper publicity about a crime which it is investigating. Publicity very often means the undoing of all the secret work, the cutting open of the net which is being drawn around the unsuspecting criminal. Mason did not expect much help from that grim stone building on the Thames Embankment. He relied more upon the searching inquiries which the reporters were making in half-a- dozen places.

By six o'clock that night he had the skeleton of a narrative sketched out, and reported to his chief.

"It is going to be a big story," he said.

"The very fact that people are being shielded, that Scotland Yard has issued no warning to jewellers, seems to prove that this is a bigger thing than I at first anticipated."

That night the editor, dining at his club, saw Jack Danton wandering disconsolately into the smoke-room, and button-holed him.

"You're the very man I want to see," he said.

"Oh, lord," said Jack dismally, "you're not going to ask me who the 'Candid Friend' is?"

"Something more important than that," said the editor. "We've got a big story in the office, and I want some sort of confirmation before I print it."

He was not speaking the exact truth. The story would be printed whether it was confirmed from headquarters or not. The character of the mystery which surrounded the robberies was sufficient justification.

"What about those jewel robberies?" he asked, eyeing the other keenly.

Jack presented a blank face. The word had gone out from the Commissioner's office that no word about the jewel robberies must be spoken.

"Jewel robberies?" he asked, with an heroic attempt to appear puzzled, "which particular robbery? Do you mean the smashing of Carter and Smith's shop in Regent Street?"

"You know jolly well I don't mean that," said the editor. "I am referring to the extraordinary burglaries that have been committed at various country houses. A number of diamond plaques have been stolen, presumably by somebody who is a guest in the house."

"I've never heard of them," said Jack, shaking his head. "What wonderful fellows you newspaper men are: you get stories of crimes which Scotland Yard has never heard about—upon my word, I believe you commit them yourselves to make news."

The editor was an old friend of his, and friendship has its privileges.

"I'd like to bet any amount of money that you're lying," he said. "Your air of innocence is one of the worst camouflages I have ever seen. I am going to print that story."

"Print it, my dear lad," said Jack wearily, "only don't expect me, to read it. I never read your beastly paper, anyway."

The editor chuckled, finished his coffee, and went quickly back to the office.

The pressure of a bell brought Mason.

"Have you any further facts about these diamond plaques?" he said.

"Sufficient to make a good story," replied the other with relish. "Mrs. Crewe-Sanders lost a plaque only a week ago, and Miss Diana Wold, the society beauty, lost another in exactly similar circumstances. I'll go ahead."

He went ahead to the extent of two columns with glaring headlines.

SOCIETY'S MYSTERIOUS ROBBER.

The Criminal Who Only Steals Diamond Plaques. WHO IS THE THIEF?

It was an excellent story, excellently done, and at eleven o'clock that night, when the pages had been "plated," and all was ready for printing, nothing seemed to prevent the Daily Telephone making a big scoop.

Before the plates were on the machine, however, there arrived at the Telephone office two important police officers, one of whom was the Commissioner. They were shown immediately to the editor's room.

"We hear you've got a big story to-night," said the Commissioner, "a pretty little fairy story about stolen jewellery."

"That's right," said the editor with a smile. "Have you come to give us a few more details?"

"Not on your life," said the Commissioner, as he sat himself on the other side of the editor's desk, "only—you will not print that story."

"Why not?" asked the astonished editor.

"There are many reasons, and one is the interest of justice. It is an old tag which I have trotted out before," said the Commissioner calmly, "but I am trotting it out with greater emphasis than heretofore."

"But why on earth not?" asked the editor.

The Commissioner took an envelope from his pocket, extracted a slip of paper, and pushed it towards the journalist.

"I hate to remind you that certain sections of the Defence of the Realm Act are still in force," he said apologetically, "but here is an order."

The editor read the slip with a frown.

"Damn!" he said.

The story of the jewel robbery did not appear.

That was not the only mystery circumstance attached to the theft. Diana had a woman friend in Cannes, and the day after the theft she despatched a long telegram describing the loss; two hours after she had sent the wire to the post-office it came back to her in an envelope, and written across the telegraph form in red ink were the words:

"This cannot be despatched."

She got on to the telephone and demanded furiously from an important official the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

"I am exceedingly sorry that you should have been inconvenienced, Miss Wold," said that gentleman suavely, "but, as a matter of fact, I stopped the message going myself."

"But why?" she demanded.

"The police requested us to allow no reference to the robberies to pass over the wire—you see, we are anxious to catch the thief," he went on soothingly, "and the greater secrecy there is, and the less that is said about this matter, the easier it will be for the police to make their capture."

She hung up the receiver, wondering what on earth it all meant.

CHAPTER XI

JACK did not see Barbara May for three or four days, although he was in the Row every morning, cursing himself for his folly, but bitterly disappointed when she failed to appear. At last he could stand it no longer—he would see her; he would talk to her, and would not mince his words. At least he might dispel the cloud of suspicion which surrounded her, and if the worse came to the worst he might help her to evade the consequence of her mad acts. That she was a victim—the dupe of others—he was certain.

Barbara May had a little flat in Weatherhall Mansions, Victoria. He thought at first of ringing her up to tell her he was coming, but decided that on the whole there was a chance of her refusing to see him.

As he entered the vestibule of the residential Mansions the elevator was coming down, and he stepped aside as the door rattled back and two men stepped out. The first was the man he had seen at Bird-in-Bush Road; the second was he who had called himself Smith, and who had been described to him as the manager of Streetley's. They were talking together in a low voice as they walked out, and neither man appeared to notice him. What did it

mean? He must have an end to this mystery; though he told himself, as the lift carried him up to the third floor, that he had no more right to inquire into Barbara May's private life than he had to take out of the hands of the police-officers who were engaged in unravelling the mysterious robberies a case in which

he had no concern.

A trim maid admitted him, and showed him into a small and pretty drawing-room. A few minutes afterwards Barbara May came in.

"This is a great surprise, Mr. Danton," she said. "I am very glad to see you. Is it anything serious?" she asked quickly, noticing the look in his face.

"It is rather serious, Barbara," he said, and she flushed slightly. "I saw two men coming out of the elevator as I came in. Are they friends of yours?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know which two men you refer to," drawled the girl. "I had two men to see me to-day on a matter of business."

"I refer to the man Smith—the manager of Streetley's—and the man who lives in Bird-in-Bush Road," he said bluntly, and he saw her colour change.

"You are being very mysterious, Mr. Danton," she said after awhile, and her voice was quiet and even. She met his gaze without flinching. "Won't you tell me just what you mean?"

"I mean this," said Jack quietly, "that wherever this strange thief in the night has stolen into people's bedrooms and taken their jewellery, you have been a guest in the same house. I mean, also, that you sent away by post from the Widdicombe's place a package containing a box which I had reason to believe held the diamond plaque of Diana Wold. That packet was addressed to a house in Bird-in-Bush Road, which is in the occupation of an Indian."

He paused but she was silent, and he went on:

"Barbara, won't you let me help you? I know you visited that house the day you came back from London, and I am worried to death about the whole business. I haven't come here because I am a police-officer, I have come here because I am—a—a—friend. I will help you, even though it means my eternal disgrace and my being thrown out of the police service."

He saw her face soften, and impulsively she laid her hand on his.

"Jack Danton, you are very good," she said gently, "but I think you are wasting your sympathy. Anyway," she went on after another interregnum of silence, "I could never accept such a sacrifice at your hands."

"But won't you tell me what it all means? Barbara, did you take Diana's plaque?"

She did not answer.

"Tell me. For God's sake, tell me. This thing is driving me mad."

Suddenly she rose, and she was a shade paler.

"I cannot explain anything, Jack," she said. "If you think I stole the jewellery, if you believe I am a thief, I must let you think so for a little while. You don't think I am the 'Candid Friend' also, do you?" she asked with a little smile.

"No, no; I'll swear you are not that. Barbara, are you in somebody's hands? Are you being—are they using you as a tool? Can't I help you?"

He grew almost incoherent in his anxiety.

She shook her head.

"You cannot help me at all, except—except—" her voice sank, and the words were almost whispered, "except by trusting me. And now," she said briskly, "I am going to ring for tea and you are not to ask me any more questions."

"Barbara," he interrupted slowly, "is this mystery connected with the Kali Diamond?"

She went white, and put out her hand to grip a table for support.

"What do you mean?" she breathed. "Kali Diamond? I—I don't understand, Jack," and then, turning suddenly, she walked swiftly from the room.

A few minutes later her maid came in.

"Miss May has a very bad headache, and she asks you to excuse her. Can I get you some tea, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Jack rising unsteadily. His brain was in a whirl; his thoughts so confused that he could not order them. He went out into the street like a man in a dream. Barbara May was a thief—a thief!

CHAPTER XII

DIANA Wold was blessed with great possessions. She had a great house in Carlton House Terrace, an estate in Norfolk, a villa at Cannes, and a miniature palace on the shores of Lake Como. The loss of a couple of thousand pounds worth of jewellery did not worry her at all; it was, indeed, well worth the excitement the burglary had caused, and the interest which had come in consequence into her bored life.

Many men had wooed Diana and had found her as cold as stone and less responsive. Men had little or no attraction for her; her interests lay elsewhere.

Beautiful as she was indubitably, a consciousness of her charms awakened no desire to employ them until she came against the polished granite of Jack Danton's personality. He was the one good-looking man she had met who did not approach her with that possessive confidence which she had invariably found was the attribute of presentable men. He had neither courted nor flattered her, and when he had neglected her it had not been a studious, but a natural neglect.

She had known him when he was in the army, and before he had begun to serve the State in another capacity.

The war had matured him, made him something different to the rather gawky lad she had known when she was in short frocks; but even in those days he had never flattered her, never even asked her to dance with him, but his magnificent aloofness had not piqued her until now.

"Jack Danton treats me as though I were a very elegant piece of furniture," she had said to Widdicombe as they came up to town together.

"There are times when I like to be regarded as human."

"In other words, he doesn't make love to you," said Widdicombe bluntly. "Well, that must be a relief, Diana, and the poor fellow is saving himself a great many heartaches."

She laughed softly.

"I don't think Jack Danton's heart is of the aching kind," she said.

She expected him to call upon her when she was in town, and when he did not she wrote him a little note and asked him to come to tea.

He arrived to the second—his very punctuality annoyed her—he was so obviously paying a polite call that the girl was unexpectedly annoyed.

"Jack," she said at last—with touch of asperity in her tone—"one would imagine to hear you talk that you had been reading a manual on the art of polite and meaningless conversation."

"I'm sorry if I have been quiet," he said in surprise.

"I expected you to be interesting," she said almost tartly. "Can't you tell me about murders and criminals, and bank robberies, and things like that?"

He stared at her and she laughed.

"Really, Jack, you don't suppose that your occupation is a secret, do you? We all know you're a policeman: that is why it is so fascinating to know you."

He laughed awkwardly.

"I am sorry I can't tell you about the amazing mysteries I have unravelled," he said. "The fact is, I haven't unravelled them. Police work is a very mundane, humdrum sort of a business, and the purple spots occur at horribly long intervals."

"Why don't you marry?" she asked suddenly.

"Marry—me?" he said astonished. "My dear Miss Wold—"

"And please don't call me Miss Wold: you used to call me by my Christian name, and if you don't do that I shall feel uncomfortable when I call you Jack."

"Then I'll relieve you from that embarrassment, Diana," he smiled. "Why haven't I married? Heaven knows. In the first place, I am a poor man and couldn't support a wife; in the second place—"

"In the second place," she repeated when he paused.

"Well, there is nobody who wants me particularly."

"Is there nobody you want?"

"No," he answered shortly.

She was looking down at the handkerchief she held in her hand.

"I don't think that the question of money ought to come into marriage," she said. "Why don't you marry a rich girl? There are plenty of them about."

"But none that I'm particularly in love with," smiled Jack; "and anyway, Diana, I couldn't marry a woman who was immensely wealthy and live on her;

it would be a hateful life."

"That is your conceit," she said, looking up. "If you were a rich man you would not think twice about asking a poor girl to marry you, and she wouldn't think twice of accepting. You could do that, because such a marriage would give you a lordly feeling of patronage."

Jack shook his head.

"I don't agree with you; and anyway, I should never give a woman an opportunity of being particularly lordly or patronising where I was concerned."

Diana Wold was annoyed: she had no desire to marry Jack or any other man, but she would dearly love to have added his proposal to a score of others that had come her way, and he was tantalizingly and maddeningly aloof. She almost hated him for that.

"Are you in love with Barbara?" she asked, and Jack started.

"That's exactly the question the 'Candid Friend' asked the Commissioner."

"Oh, do tell me about the 'Candid Friend,'" she broke in eagerly. "Is it a man or a woman, and did he really say you were in love with Barbara? How wonderful! How clever of him!"

"I don't think it is particularly clever, and one of these days I shall take the 'Candid Friend' by the arm and I shall lead her to the nearest police station, and she will cut an ignoble and ignominious figure in the bright steel pen," said Jack savagely.

So he was in love with Barbara May, she thought. Her quick woman intuition had divined his secret. And, as she thought, a wave of anger swept over her.

She did not like Barbara May, and knew that the dislike was mutual. And if all her suspicions had justification, what an ironical situation would be created! Jack Danton would be called upon to arrest

the woman he loved! The very thought of this possibility brought a new interest into her jaded young life.

After Jack had gone she considered the situation in her beautiful little boudoir overlooking the Mall.

Barbara May's address she knew. She had got to obtain admission to those apartments, and have time to make her search, and she was certain that she could discover evidence which would leave no possible doubt of Barbara's guilt.

CHAPTER XIII

LATER in the evening, in answer to a telephone call, the chief of a private detective agency called upon her, and was shown into her study.

"I am going to be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Day," said Diana after the visitor was seated. "I have reason to suspect that a girl friend of mine is the 'Candid Friend' of whom you have heard."

"The anonymous letter-writer," said Day in surprise.

Diana nodded.

"I do not want the police to interfere, as I am most anxious that she should not be exposed publicly," said Diana sweetly.

"One hates the thought of a young girl facing the ordeal of police court proceedings, but at the same time I want to discover whether my suspicions are correct. In fact, Mr. Day, I want to search her flat whilst she and her maid are out."

The detective pulled a long face.

"That's rather a serious business, miss," he said; "and it is interfering with the work of the regular police, which I do not like to do. You see, I am an ex-sergeant of the police myself."

"I will compensate you for any risks you may run," said Diana steadily, "and, at any rate, there is no reason why you should not make the necessary inquiries, and—" she paused, "secure me a key which will open the flat door. I am not asking you to help me in the search."

"That's different," said the man, relieved; "and though, of course, I can't get you the key of the flat, I daresay I could call here one day and leave a key by accident, which you might find would fit the lock, and I could also help you by discovering when the lady and her servant are out."

"That is all I ask you to do," said Diana. She opened the little bureau and took out a bank note. "This is for a hundred pounds, and is only on account, Mr. Day," she said.

Mr. Day pocketed the note with every evidence of satisfaction.

On the Thursday, three days later, he called again, but made no reference to Barbara May or the Weatherhall Mansions flat. When he left she found a key on the table, and put it into her bag with a smile.

The next morning she was called by telephone.

"The person you are interested in has gone to Sunningdale to stay with Mrs. Merstham. She has taken her maid," said a voice.

"Thank you," said Diana.

She collected all the bureau keys she could find in the house; they might be useful, she thought, for if there was any evidence of her crime in the flat, Barbara May would certainly lock it up.

She walked into the vestibule of the Mansions, and, to her relief, the elevator had just gone up. She was able to walk up the stairs without the lift man seeing her. Yet it was with a beating heart that she opened the door of Barbara's flat, walked in, and closed the door softly behind her.

From room to room she went, opening drawers, peering into cupboards, but without making a discovery until she went into Barbara's bedroom. There were few articles of furniture in the room, which was a large and airy one, and the only locked drawer proved amenable to the attentions of one of the keys she had brought with her. But here she drew blank, to her disappointment, for the drawer contained nothing that was in any way helpful.

She was leaving the room disappointed, when it occurred to her to turn down the pillows of the bed. It looked as though she had failed again when, by accident, her hand touched the sheeted overlay and she felt something hard. To pull aside the sheet was the work of a second, and then she saw and gasped.

Neatly let into the mattress was a square space occupied by a cash box. She extracted this with shaking hands, and carried the box to a table near the window. It was locked, but the lock was of a flimsy character. The third of her keys fitted and the lid swung back. And as she took out the trays with which the box was fitted, she gasped, for each tray contained two diamond pendants!

Open-mouthed, Diana examined the jewels; each bore a neat little linen label on which the name of the owner was written. She saw her own plaque, it was the third she examined. What should she do? She was in some dilemma. She could not carry the box to the police and say that she had made a search. That would look bad. Society would not view her actions very kindly, however noble her intentions might have been.

And then she had an inspiration. She replaced the jewels carefully on their trays, closed the lid of the box and locked it, and placed it back in the square hole that was cut in the mattress, covering this with the sheet and placing the two pillows neatly where she had found them.

In a few minutes she was driving back to Carlton House Terrace. It would be a lovely revenge!

She got on to Scotland Yard by telephone, and, as luck would have it, Jack was in his office.

"Will you come to me at once?" she pleaded. "It is very important."

"I am awfully busy," he excused himself.

"But this is tremendously important. It affects Barbara May."

"I'll come," he said shortly.

She awaited his arrival, hugging herself with joy. There was in her composition a streak of malignity which Jack had yet to discover.

He found her sitting at a tea-table, and was a little brusque in his manner.

"I can't stay to tea, Diana," he began.

"You will stay to tea," she said sweetly, "I have a lot to tell you, and I must have the right atmosphere, and the atmosphere for scandal is the tea-table."

He seated himself reluctantly, waiting and wondering what her news would be.

"You are a police-officer, Jack?" she demanded, as she handed him his tea.

"I believe I am," he replied curtly.

"You have taken all sorts of oaths and things, haven't you? I understand that the police are bound, just as soldiers are bound, by promises to do their duty in any circumstances."

He put down the tea.

"What is the idea, Diana?" he asked quietly.

"I have found the jewel thief," she said.

His jaw dropped.

"I have found the jewel thief, and I can tell you where the jewels are," she said. "And I am reporting this to you officially," she added with emphasis. "The jewels are in Barbara May's flat. They are contained in a steel box beneath her pillow, and it is your duty to secure a search warrant and verify my statement."

He was stunned by the news.

"Where is Barbara?" he asked huskily.

"I really don't know where Barbara is. I am not concerned in that respect. I am telling you, Jack, that the jewels are in her flat. You must report this."

He rose unsteadily.

"I suppose I must," he said, and she knew that he would do his duty.

The Chief Commissioner listened to the story unmoved.

"How does Miss Wold know that the jewels are in Miss May's flat?"

"I don't know, sir," said Jack wearily. "I have reported the matter, and that is as far as my duty goes."

"Very good," said the Commissioner, pressing a bell; but since you have come into this case, you had better conduct a search yourself. I will get the necessary warrant for you, and I daresay you will be able to manage to get into the flat. Oh, by the way, as Miss Wold is interested in this matter, she had better be present when the search is made."

"Is that necessary?" asked Jack.

"Absolutely," said the Commissioner firmly. "This lady has brought an accusation against Miss May, and I must have the search made in her presence."

It was a savage Jack Danton whose voice Diana heard over the telephone:

"The Commissioner wants you to be present when the search is made," and she heard the tremble of fury in his voice and smiled.

"When will that be?" she asked sweetly.

"At once," was the reply, and she heard the click of the receiver being hung up, and laughed softly.

She was waiting in the vestibule at Weatherhall Mansions, when Jack, accompanied by two detectives, arrived, and though she greeted him, he did not reply.

"You're being very foolish," she murmured as they went up in the elevator together. "I am not to blame. Is it unnatural that I should want to recover my stolen property?"

He did not reply.

By some means the police had secured a master key of the flat, and the door was opened, and Diana led the way to the bedroom."

"First of all, Miss Wold," said Jack, planting himself squarely in the doorway of the bedroom, "how came you to know that the property was here?"

"I know 'from information received,'" she said maliciously, "that is the correct terminology, isn't it?"

"Then perhaps you will show us where it is."

"With pleasure," said Diana.

She turned back the pillows, and pulled down the sheet.

"There," she said triumphantly, and pointed to the black box.

Jack pulled it out with a groan, and placed it on the identical table where a few hours before she had rapturously examined its contents.

One of the detectives had a skeleton key, and the box was opened.

"There!" said Diana.

"Where?" asked Jack.

She stared.

The first tray was empty!

CHAPTER XIV

HASTILY she pulled out the tray. The second also was empty, and the third contained nothing but a typewritten slip of paper, which Jack read and passed without a word to the girl. The inscription ran:

"Sorry to disappoint you"

and that was all.

The reaction after that tense hour of agony through which he had passed was such that Jack laughed.

"Well, Miss Wold," he demanded, "where is your plaque?"

"It was here an hour ago, I'll swear, she said furiously. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"Oh, you saw it? So I gather you secured an entrance to the flat and searched it?" said Jack.

"I did," she said. "It is no use glaring at me, Jack. I tell you the plaques were here a little more than an hour ago. I saw them with my own eyes, six of them."

"And now we are looking at them with our own eyes," said Jack sardonically, "and they are not there. I won't tell you, Miss Wold, what I think of you.

You have tried to bring an innocent girl to ruin. You are despicable."

Without a word she turned and left the room: her rage made speech impossible.

"Well, that's that," said Jack after she had gone. "And now I have to explain to Miss May how I came to her flat armed with a search warrant. Phew!"

He wiped his streaming forehead. And yet he was puzzled. He knew that Diana would never have brought the charge unless she were certain that the jewellery was there. The discovery of the slip at the bottom of the box was proof positive that something had been concealed therein, and had been removed before the arrival of the search party.

But Barbara May was out of London. She was staying with people in the country, and it could not have been the girl who took away the jewels—if they were ever there.

When he heard that Barbara May had returned to town he made it his business to call, but before he could frame his apology she stopped him with a smile.

"I've heard all about it, Mr. Danton," she said, "and I know that you were not responsible. Really, you should take Diana into Scotland Yard; she seems a most admirable detective," she added drily.

"I don't want to put it on to Diana," protested Jack. "I was a fool ever to carry the story to the Commissioner."

"You had to do it," she said quietly. "It was your duty, Jack, and I should have blamed you if you hadn't."

She laughed quietly.

"Poor Diana, it must have been an awful blow to her when she found I was not the jewel thief. Thank heavens!" she added piously, "no jewellery was missing from Ascot!"

They laughed together.

"A surprising , thing has happened, though," he said more seriously. "Do you know that all the jewellery that was stolen during the past three months has been returned, even Diana's?"

"Is that so?" she raised her eyebrows. "Returned to their rightful owners?"

He nodded.

She expressed no curiosity, and went on to talk about other matters. He thought she was looking ill: there were tired lines about her eyes, and her manner was nervous. She reverted to the subject of Diana just before he left.

"In proof that I have forgiven Diana," she said, "I am going to her party to-night. Will you be there?"

He had received an invitation, which he had ignored. This was surprising news.

"Really, that is awfully sporting of you, Barbara," he said warmly, "and if you go, I'll go to."

"You see," she went on with a twinkle in her eye, "Diana has two diamond plaques and maybe there will be a chance of my getting the other. I've rather a

passion for plaques, you know."

"Please don't talk about it," he said; "you make me feel very uncomfortable."

Diana's parties were invariably lavish entertainments. Jack expected the place to be crowded, but he had no idea of the exclusive nature of the invitation.

As he made his way up the broad staircase, at the head of which Diana, a radiant, beautiful figure in silver tissue, stood waiting to receive her guests, he rubbed elbows with Cabinet Ministers, great Ambassadors, eminent Peers, whose names figure prominently in the daily press....

"I am glad you came, Jack." Diana offered him her little hand.

"You have forgiven me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," he said, evading the question, for he had not forgiven her, nor would he.

"I see you haven't," she laughed lightly. "Now run along and find Barbara. She is looking beautiful to-night."

He found the girl in a corner of the crowded ballroom, and disengaging herself from her friends, she came towards him.

"I want to speak to you," she said in a low voice. "Come into Diana's drawing-room. There's nobody there, and she told me I might use it if I wanted."

Diana saw them disappear and a hard look came into her eyes. She saw them only as lovers anxious to find some secluded place where they might enjoy one another's association without interruption. She would have been a much-surprised woman if she had heard the first words which Barbara May addressed to the young man.

"Jack, I want you to do me a favour," she said as she closed the door behind her. Her voice was urgent and worried.

"Why, anything I can do for you Barbara—" he began.

"But this is an unusual thing," she said. "Jack, I want ten uninterrupted minutes in Diana's bedroom."

He could only gape at her.

"At twelve o'clock Diana allows all her servants to come down to the gallery overlooking the ballroom to see the dancing," she said rapidly. "That is an opportunity which I cannot afford to miss. I want you to stand at the foot of the stairs and keep watch. If anybody comes I want you to signal me."

"But—but—how—?" he stammered.

"There is an electric light switch on the second floor," she went on rapidly. "It turns on the light outside Diana's bedroom door. There is plenty of excuse for you being on the stairs. It is just outside the billiard-room, where nobody will be to-night. And you can always say that you were bored and wanted to knock the balls about."

"But, Barbara, what does it mean? I don't understand you. What do you want to do in Diana's bedroom?"

"Will you help me?" she almost pleaded, her hands clasped together and a look of earnest entreaty in her eyes. "Don't you realize that this is the 14th? No, no, I don't mean that," she said hurriedly. "You don't understand, but will you do it for me?"

He thought a moment.

"Yes," he said huskily. "I don't know what you're going to do, Barbara, but I trust you."

She gripped his two hands between hers, and there was something in her face that made him tremble; then suddenly she bent to him and he felt the flutter of her lips against his. Only for a fraction of a second—and then she was gone.

CHAPTER XV

"HAVE you two' people exchanged confidences?" laughed Diana, as they came back to the ballroom together. "I suppose you've been telling one another what a horrible pig I am."

"We never mentioned you once, dear," said Barbara, and Jack marvelled at her self-possession.

When he had followed her, and had overtaken her at the door of the billiard-room, all trace of her anxiety had passed. She was her old equable self. "Women are funny things," thought Jack, and waited uneasily for the midnight hour to approach.

He saw the servants come one by one into the little gallery—trim maids, staid footmen, a matronly housekeeper, and two stout cooks, and then he caught Barbara's eye and strolled out.

The ball-room of Diana's house was the ground floor. On the first was her drawing-room, her study, and the billiard-room. Above were the bedrooms.

He strolled carelessly up the stairs, relieved that nobody saw him. One light burnt in the billiard-room and he switched on the remainder, took out a cue and laid it on the table. Then he went back to the landing in time to meet Barbara May. She uttered no word, just a friendly nod, and in a second she was flying up the stairs, leaving him in an

agony of apprehension. Five minutes passed, ten minutes, and then he saw a figure at the bottom of the stairs. It was Diana. He had time to turn on the switch when she saw him.

"Why, Jack, whatever are you doing?"

"I've come up to play a game of billiards, but I can't find a partner," he said.

He was in a panic. Barbara might come down at any moment.

"Billiards? You foolish man; why aren't you dancing? And where is Barbara?"

"I expect Barbara is less foolish than I am," said Jack. "I left her in the ball-room."

"Come along, I will play billiards with you," said Diana, and walked into the billiard-room.

He followed, closing the door behind him.

"Don't close the door, Jack," said Diana, "it is very hot in here."

He turned the handle and opened the door a few inches.

"Open it wide. Think of the proprieties," she mocked him.

He threw the door open reluctantly.

"And I don't really want to play billiards and neither do you," said Diana, throwing down the cue she had picked up. "It is a hateful game. Jack, what is the matter with you? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

He laughed nervously.

"I spend a whole lot of my time chasing ghosts," he said. "Come along, Diana, play me one game."

He wanted to manoeuvre her with her back to the open door. At some part of the game that must surely occur.

"No; I won't play billiards," she said. "I'm going up to my room to get an aspirin for poor Molly Banton. She has a splitting headache."

"But she can wait," he urged.

"So can you," she bantered him.

His heart stood still as he heard her going up the stairs, and he waited. Presently he heard a cry.

"Jack, Jack!"

"What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"Come quickly."

He dashed up the stairs into the beautiful bedroom. Diana was standing by her dressing-table.

"Look!" she gasped. "Somebody has opened this safe. I've lost my other plaque!"

His mouth was dry, his tongue refused to speak.

"Lost your plaque!" he stammered, and all the time he was wondering where Barbara was concealed. She must have been listening at the head of the

stairs when Diana went into the billiard-room, and had seized the momentary closing of the door as an opportunity for slipping past. He was relieved, so relieved that he could conduct the search of the room.

"Have you seen anybody come upstairs?" asked Diana suddenly, with growing suspicion.

"Nobody," he said boldly.

"Jack, are you speaking the truth? Has Barbara been up here?"

Her eyes were fixed on his accusingly.

"No; I swear she hasn't."

"Why were you downstairs? You don't play billiards, Jack. Where is Barbara?"

"In the ball-room, I tell you."

"We'll see," said Diana determinedly.

They went downstairs together and her first question was addressed to the butler who was arranging a buffet in a little room off the ball-room.

"Miss May, madam? She's gone home I saw her go about four minutes ago. She had to come into the ladies' room opposite to get her cloak."

"I see," said Diana slowly, and turned to Jack.

"Will you please find Barbara May and save a scandal," she said; and Jack immensely relieved to get away, needed no further bidding.

A taxi took him to Barbara's flat, and the lift-man told him that she had been in a few minutes.

He knocked at the flat door and rang the bell, but there was no answer. He saw through the transom that a light was burning in the hall, and knocked again.

It was Barbara who opened the door, but she made no pretence of being glad to see him.

"I can't see you now, Jack," she said, "will you please go away?"

"But I want to ask you something, Barbara."

"Will you go?" she said in agony.

"I refuse to go," said Jack doggedly; "there is some mystery here which I must unravel."

"Please don't," she begged; but he pushed her aside and, striding down the passage, passed into her little sitting-room.

The sight that met his eyes struck him dumb. Sitting at a table were three men. One was the tall coloured man he had seen in Bird-in-Bush Road; the second was "Mr. Smith," the jeweller; the third was a wizened little Indian in a white turban. He held in his hand the missing plaque, and with deft fingers he was wrenching aside the settings of a stone, the great

diamond in the centre.

CHAPTER XVI

"WHAT is the meaning of this?" demanded Jack hoarsely, and then the big man looked up and saw him.

"Don't move," he said. "Put up your hands."

A Browning pistol had appeared as if by magic in his hand, and Jack obeyed.

"Take him, Smith, and put him in the next room; and if you make trouble, Mr. Danton, there will be worse trouble for you—believe me. No; let him stay here," he said as an afterthought. "Put the bracelets on him, Jim."

Before Jack realized what had happened, his hands were scientifically manacled.

"Sit down and don't make trouble," said the big man, "and believe me, Mr. Danton, it hurts me more than it hurts you."

The girl had not appeared. Jack thought he heard her sobbing in the passage. Once he was disposed of the three men paid him no further attention.

"You're sure?" said Smith.

"I am sure," said the little Indian and held the stone in the palm of his hand.

The big man looked at his watch.

"One o'clock," he said. "Jim, you might get on the telephone to Croydon: tell them to have an aeroplane out and ready for half- past four, and warn Paris to have landing lights for us. There's no need to warn Milan. When shall we reach Baghdad?"

"Three days—two days with any luck," said the other.

Jack listened open-mouthed.

"It will be a close shave," said the big man thoughtfully. "We can only pray that we have no engine trouble. Now, Singh, you'd better fix this plaque and get that matter settled."

The man Smith took a long flat case from his pocket, and opened it, and Jack saw the glitter of many diamonds.

"Here's one, a little bigger than the other. Can you fix it?"

He handed it to the Indian who picked it up with a pair of tweezers and placed it in the cavity from whence he had taken the big diamond. They watched him in silence, and presently he handed the plaque to the big man who passed it back to Smith.

"Take that to Miss Diana Wold to-night. Tell her we've caught the thief," he added, and then, glancing at Jack, walked over to him. "I'm very sorry to treat you as I have done, Inspector," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "but it will be some satisfaction for you to know that I am a Commissioner of the Indian Police."

"The devil you are!" said Jack.

"The devil I am," said the other, "and I can assure you I have had a very unhappy time."

He stooped down, twisted a key into the handcuffs, and in a second Jack was free.

"I'm going along now, and I'll leave Miss May to explain just what has happened."

"Then Miss May was the jewel thief?" gasped Jack.

"She was indeed," said the other; "the cleverest thief you've had in London for years. "And," he glanced at Jack slyly, "the prettiest."

CHAPTER XVII

"I DON'T know how to tell you the story, Jack—not coherently," said the girl. "But it is all about the Kali diamond."

"The Kali diamond?" repeated Jack in surprise. "Why, that was the stone that Lord Widdicombe was talking about," he said. "It was once stolen and they had great trouble to get it back."

She nodded gravely.

"It has been stolen since then," she said, "and we have had even greater trouble. The stone isn't a very valuable one, as you count diamonds; but on one of the facets there is a microscopic writing which is believed by the natives to be divinely inscribed. About six months ago an Indian jewel thief broke into the Sanctuary and stole this stone, and the theft was not discovered for some time, and then only by the High Priest of the Sect, who communicated with the police, knowing that there would be trouble if the stone was not exhibited and examined by the elders on the Day of Showing. The thief was traced; but unfortunately he had sold the stone and several others to a dealer who had sent them to Europe.

"The buyer was traced to London, and that is where I came in—for I have been in the Foreign Office Secret Service for three years." She smiled up at his

astonished face.

"Secret Service? Then you are—"

"I'm a real detective," she said demurely, "but don't interrupt please. All the stones that the receiver brought to London were sold to one firm, the firm of Streetley. The buyer was discovered and he confessed. He had no idea that any of the diamonds were the famous Kali diamond. The Indian Commissioner who came to London brought with him Mr. Singh, who is not only a member of the Sect which owns the Kali diamond, but is a clever jeweller, who knows the diamond so well that he could recognize it immediately. The Kali stone is very much like every other stone, and it requires an expert eye to detect the difference."

"That was the man who lived in Bird-in-Bush Road," said Jack.

"He lived in a little quiet place in Peckham, and to him were brought all the stones that were stolen."

"But why steal them at all?" asked Jack.

"We didn't steal them all," said the girl with a smile. "Streetley's had used all the diamonds they bought in various plaques. They were large and beautiful and the very things to centre that kind of jewel. When they found that they had disposed of the stone, they sent to all the people to whom they sold jewellery, making some excuse for getting the jewels back. In many cases the plaques were returned; but in some cases the owners refused to part with the property they had bought, probably believing that Streetley's had unwittingly given them more value for their money than they were entitled to. There was only one way to get the plaques back from these

obdurate people, and that was to steal them, and I was given that unpleasant task."

A light dawned on Jack.

"So really you were acting as an official of the government?"

She nodded.

"It was a very close call," she said gravely. "In ten days the stone has to be shown. They are taking it to India by aeroplane, as you probably guessed from what Mr. Smith—who, like yourself, is a Detective Inspector, by-the-way—had said. Every stone had to be examined carefully. It wasn't necessary to make so thorough an examination of Diana's second plaque, because that was the very last that Streetley's had sold, and which we had not seen."

"Then Diana's story was true? The jewels were in the box under your pillow?"

She nodded.

"Yes, but your Commissioner knew all about it, too," she said with twinkling eyes. "The moment he heard that Diana had made the discovery, he telephoned to Mr. Smith, who came to the flat, took away the jewels, and left an impertinent note behind."

The Commissioner knew it all the time. No wonder he had kept Jack from the jewel thieves!

"I am afraid I've hurt Diana's feelings," said Jack ruefully. "After all, she had some reason for her belief."

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was on the following afternoon that Barbara May was announced and Diana rose to meet her.

"I have had my plaque back, Barbara," said Diana. "I presume the police found it? Jack is an admirable detective, and he knew just where it was."

"And where was that?" asked Barbara.

"In your flat, my dear," said the girl sweetly. "And he is not going to hush it up this time. I think it is only fair to tell you that I have written to every one of our friends telling them the true circumstances of the case."

"In fact, that I'm a thief?" said Barbara quietly.

"That you're a thief. It is an ugly word, but it doesn't seem an exaggeration to describe you that way."

"That's mystery number one explained," said Barbara with a sigh. "I'm very glad it is all over, and that everybody knows. Mystery number two ends simultaneously."

"What is mystery number two?" asked Diana with a curl of her lips.

"The identity of the 'Candid Friend,'" said Barbara. "When I drugged you—yes, I did drug you—though it is one of the nicest drugs in the world for the purpose and has no bad after-effects—I found your plaque, Diana, but I found something else. A bundle of letters written ready for posting."

There was a deadly silence.

"Go on," said Diana at last.

"They were written to various people and they were all signed 'Candid Friend,' and they were full of scurrilous, slanderous, beastly accusations against people who think you are their dearest friend."

"That is a lie," said Diana, white to the lips.

"It is true."

"Prove it," said the girl harshly.

"When I went down to Widdicombe's place to stay," said Barbara—"you know I am a Foreign Office detective, I suppose?"

Diana started.

"A Foreign Office detective?" she said incredulously. "That isn't true."

"Can't you think of anything else to call me but a liar," said Barbara wearily. "It is perfectly true, as you will discover. I was looking for a diamond, a certain diamond which the government was most anxious to recover. That is why I stole your plaque, and stole the plaques of everybody else concerned. But I had a double object in going to Widdicombe. I was pretty certain that you were the 'Candid Friend,' and I thought that when I made my search for your plaque I would also look around for letters, and these I found with no difficulty and took away."

"That's a lie, said Diana. "Nothing was missing from my box but the jewel."

"I brought them back," said Barbara May cheerfully, "after I had photographed them. I took down a portable apparatus and spent the whole of that night taking blue prints of your letters, and if it is true, as you say, that you have written to everybody telling them that I am a thief, then it will be my painful duty to write to the same people enclosing copies of the 'Candid Friend' letters that you wrote."

Again a silence. "I haven't written yet," said Diana sulkily. "I intended writing."

"Then, if you haven't written," said Barbara May significantly, "don't."

She gathered up her cloak and walked to the door.

"You might find something better to do, Diana," she said. "Why don't you get married—I am speaking to you as an old married woman!"

"What?" said Diana in amazement.

"Married?"

"I married Jack at the Registrar's Office this morning," said Barbara May, "and I will dispense with your wedding present."

THE END