

The MYSTERY of the CHURCHILL PEARLS

By ARTHUR STRINGER

THE rain had come on a little after eight, as sudden and heavy as though it had been a mid-summer thunder shower.

A fusillade of bullets could scarcely have emptied Broadway more quickly. Men and women ducked under doorways, dodged into side streets, elbowed into theatre lobbies. All life vanished as promptly as though the Tenderloin from Thirty-fourth Street to Longacre Square had been a gopher village and some wolfish enemy had invaded it. Pleasure-seeking ladies fled before it as though they were made of sugar and their beauty might melt away at the touch of water. Newsboys huddled back under dripping porticos, like toads under wet rhubarb leaves.

Above the sidewalk, twenty paces from the empty doorway where I loitered, an awning suddenly appeared, springing up like a mushroom from a wet meadow. In toward one end of this awning circled a chain of broughams and taxi-cabs. As a carrier-belt emptied grain into a mill bin, so this unbroken chain ejected hurrying men and women across the wet curb into an over-lighted foyer.

I stood there, watching the last of the scattering crowd, watching the street that still seemed an elongated bull ring where a matador or two still dodged the taunt charges of vehicles. I watched the electric display signs that ran like liquid ivy about the shop fronts, and then climbed and fluttered above the roofs, misty and softened by rain. I watched the ironic heavens pour their unabating floods down on that congested and over-ripe core of a city that no water could wash clean.

Then the desolation of the empty streets began to depress me. The spray that blew in across my dampened knees made me think of shelter. I saw the lights of the theatre not more than twenty paces away. It was already a warren of crowded life; the thought of even what diluted companionship it might offer me carried an appeal.

A moment later I stood before its box-office window no wider than a mediaeval leper-squint, from which cramped and hungry souls buy access to their modern temples of wonder.

"Standing-room only," announced the autocrat of the wicket. And I meekly purchased my admission-ticket, remembering that the head usher of that particular theatre had in the past done me more than one slight service.

Yet the face of this haughtily obsequious head usher, as his hand met mine in that free-masonry which is perpetuated by certain silk-threaded scraps of oblong paper, was troubled.

"I haven't a thing left," he whispered.

I peered disconsolately about that sea of heads seeking life through the clumsy lattice of polite melodrama.

"Unless," added the usher at my elbow, "you'll take a seat in that second lower box?"

Even through the baize doors behind me I could hear the beat and patter of the rain. It was a case of any port in a storm.

"That will do nicely," I told him, and a moment later he was leading me down a side aisle into the curtained recess of the box entrance.

YET it was not ordained that I should occupy that box in lonely and unrivalled splendour. One of its chairs, set close to the brass rail and the plush-covered parapet that barred it off from the more protuberant stage box, was already occupied by a man in full evening dress. He, like myself, perhaps, had never before shared a box with other than his own acquaintances. At any rate, before favouring me with the somewhat limited breadth of his back, he turned on me one sidelong and unmistakably resentful stare.

Yet I looked at this neighbour of mine, as I seated myself, with more interest than I looked at the play actors across the footlights, for I rather preferred life in the raw to life in the syrups of stage emotionalism.

It startled me a little to find that the man, at the moment, was equally oblivious of anything taking place on the stage. His eyes, in fact, seemed fixed

on the snowy shoulders of the woman who sat at the back of the stage box, directly in front of him. As I followed the direction of his gaze I was further surprised to discover the object on which it was focused. He was staring, not at the woman herself, but at a pigeon-blood ruby set in the clasp of some pendant or necklace encircling her throat.

There was, indeed, some excuse for his staring at it. In the first place it was an extraordinarily large and vivid stone. But against the background where it lay, against the snow-white column of the neck (whitened, perhaps, by a prudent application of rice powder) it stood out in limpid ruddiness, the most vivid of fire against the purest of snow. It was a challenge to attention. It caught and held the eye. It stood there, just below where the hair billowed into its crown of Venetian gold, as semaphoric as a yardlamp to a night traveler. And I wondered, as I sat looking at it, what element beyond curiosity could coerce the man at my side into studying it so indolently and yet so intently.

About the man himself there seemed little that was exceptional. Beyond a certain quick and shrewd alertness in his eye movements as he looked about at me from time to time with a muffled resentment which I found not at all to my liking, he seemed medium in everything, in colouring, in stature, in apparel. His face was of the neutral sallowness of the sedentary New Yorker. His intelligence seemed that of the preoccupied office worker who could worm his way into an ill-fitting dress suit and placidly approve of second-rate melodrama. He seemed so without interest, in fact, that I was not averse to directing my glance once more toward the pigeon-blood ruby, which glowed like a live coal against the marble whiteness of the neck in front of me.

IT may have been mere accident, or it may have been that out of our united gaze arose some vague psychic force which disturbed this young woman. For as I sat there staring at the shimmering jewel, its wearer suddenly turned her head and glanced back at me. The next moment I was conscious of her nod and smile, unmistakably in my direction.

Then I saw who it was. I had been uncouthly staring at the shoulder blades of Alice Churchill—they were the Park Avenue Churchills—and further back in the box I caught a glimpse of her brother Benny, who had come North, I knew, from the Nicaraguan coast to recuperate from an attack of fever.

Yet I gave little thought of either of them, I must confess. At the same time that I had seen that momentarily flashing smile I had also discovered that the jeweled clasp on the girl's neck was holding in place a single string of graduated pearls, of very lovely pearls, the kind about which the frayed-cuff garret-author and the Sunday "yellows" forever love to romance. I was also not unconscious of the quick and covert glance of the man who sat so close to me.

Then I let my glance wander back to the ruby, apparently content to study its perfect cutting and its unmatchable colouring. And I knew that the man beside me was also sharing in that spectacle. I was, in fact, still staring at it, so unconscious of the movement of the play on the stage that the "dark scene," when every light in the house went out for a second or two, came to me with a distinct sense of shock.

A murmur of approval went through the house as the returning light revealed to them a completely metamorphosed stage setting. What this setting was I did not know, nor did I look up to see. For as my idly inquisitive glance once more focused itself on the columnar white neck that towered above the chair back, a second and greater shock came to me. Had that neck stood there without a head I could have been scarcely more startled.

The pigeon-blood ruby was gone. There was no

longer any necklace there. The column of snow was without its touch of ruddy light. It was left as disturbingly bare as a target without its bull's-eye. It reminded me of a marble grate without its central point of fire.

My first definite thought was that I was the witness of a crime that was as audacious as it was bewildering. Yet, on second thought, it was simple enough. The problem of proximity had already been solved. With the utter darkness had come the opportunity, the opportunity that obviously had been watched for. With one movement of the hand the necklace had been quietly and cunningly removed.

MY next quick thought was that the thief sat there in my immediate neighbourhood. There could be no other. There was no room for doubt. By some mysterious and dexterous movement the man beside me had reached forward and with that delicacy of touch doubtless born of much experience, had unclasped the jewels, all the time shrouded by the utter darkness. The audacity of the thing was astounding, yet the completeness with which it had succeeded was even more astounding.

I sat there compelling myself to a calmness which was not easy to achieve. I struggled to make my scrutiny of this strange companion of mine as quiet and leisured as possible.

Yet he seemed to feel that he was still under my eye. He seemed to chafe at that continued survey; for even as I studied him I could see a fine sweat of embarrassment come out on his face. He did not turn and look at me directly, but it was plain that he was only too conscious of my presence. And even before I quite realized what he was about, he reached quietly over, and taking up his hat and coat, rose to his feet and slipped out of the box.

That movement on his part swept away my last shred of hesitation. The sheer precipitancy of his flight was proof enough of his offence. His obvious effort to escape made me more than ever determined to keep on his trail.

And keep on his trail I did, from the moment he sidled guiltily out of that lighted theatre foyer into the still drizzling rain of Broadway. Stronger and ever stronger waves of indignation kept sweeping through me as I watched him skulk northward, with a furtive glance over his shoulder as he fled.

He was a good two hundred feet ahead of me when I saw him suddenly veer about and dodge into a doorway. I promptly threw decorum away and ran, ran like a rabbit, until I came to that doorway. I saw, as I passed through it, that it was nothing more than the Broadway entrance to the Hotel Knickerbocker. Complex and intricate as the paths of that crowded lair of life might be, I felt that under the circumstances he would not remain within its walls. And I was right in this, for as I stepped into its pillared rotunda I caught sight of my quarry hurrying out through one of the doors that opened on Forty-second Street.

I gained the open just in time to see him dodging down into the kiosk of a subway entrance. He was through the gate before I could catch up with him. I had no time to turn back and buy a ticket, for conductors were already slamming shut the doors of a south-bound "local."

"BUY me a ticket," I called to the astonished "chopper" as I tossed a dollar bill over the arm which he thrust out to stop me. I did not wait to argue it out, for the car door in front of me was already beginning to close. I had just time to catapult my body in between that sliding door and its steel frame. I knew, as I caught my breath again, that I was on the platform of the car behind the jewel thief.

And I stood there, carefully scrutinizing the line of car doors as we pulled into the Grand Central station. I did the same as we passed Thirty-third Street, and the same again at Twenty-eighth Street. The man had given no sign that he actually knew I was on his track. He might or might not have seen me. As to that I had no means of being certain. But I was certain of the fact that he was making off