

black sheep? One of them it must have been. Instinct, sisterly relationship, reason, and common-sense, all combined to turn the scale against Gerard. But that there should be a doubt at all, was not pleasant, and Alice started up impulsively and put her bonnet on.

"Where now?" cried Lady Frances.

"I will go to my sister's and ask her—and ask her—if she saw any stranger here—any suspicious person in the hall or on the stairs," stammered Alice, making the best excuse she could.

"But you know you were in the drawing-rooms all the time, and no one came in to them, suspicious or unsuspecting; so how will that aid you?"

"True," murmured Alice, "but it will be a relief to go somewhere or do something."

Alice found her sister at home. The latter instantly detected that something was wrong, for the suspense, illness, and agitation had taken every vestige of color from her cheeks and lips.

"Whatever is the matter, Alice?" was her greeting; you look just like a walking-ghost."

"I felt that I did," breathed poor Alice, "and I kept my veil down in the street, lest I might be taken for one, and scare the people. A great misfortune has fallen upon me. You saw those bracelets last night, spread out on the table?"

"Yes."

"They were in my charge, and one of them has been abstracted. It was of great value; gold links, holding diamonds."

"Abstracted!" uttered the elder sister, in both concern and surprise, but certainly without the smallest indications of a guilty knowledge. "How?"

"It is a mystery. I only left the room when I met you on the stairs; and when I went up-stairs to fetch the letter for you. Directly after you left, Lady Sarah came up from dinner, and the bracelet was not there."

"It is incredible, Alice. And no one else entered the room at all, you say? No servant? no—"

"Not any one," interrupted Alice, determined not to speak of Gerard Hope.

"Then, child, it is simply impossible," was the calm rejoinder. "It must have fallen on the ground, or been mislaid in some way."

"It is hopelessly gone. Do you remember seeing it?"

"I do remember seeing, amidst the rest, a bracelet set with diamonds, but only on the clasp, I think. It—"

"That was another; that is all safe. This was of fine gold links interspersed with brilliants. Did you see it?"

"Not that I remember. I was there scarcely a minute, for I had only strolled into the back-room just before you came down. To tell you the truth, Alice, my mind was too fully occupied with other things, to take much notice even of jewels. Do not look so perplexed; it will be all right. Only you and I were in the room, you say, and we could not take it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Alice, clasping her hands, and lifting up her white beseeching face to her sister's, "did you take it? In— in sport; or in—Oh! surely you were not tempted to take it for anything else? You said you had need of money?"

"Alice, are we going to have one of your old scenes of excitement? Strive for calmness. I am sure you do not know what you are implying. My poor child, I would rather help you to jewels than take them from you."

"But look at the mystery."

"It does appear to be a mystery, but it will no doubt be cleared up. Alice, what could you have been dreaming of, to suspect me? Have we not grown up together in our honorable home? You ought to know me, if any one does."

"And you really know nothing of it?" moaned Alice, with a sobbing catching of the breath.

"Indeed I do not. In truth I do not." If I could help you out of your perplexity I would thankfully do it. Shall I return with you and assist you to search for the bracelet?"

"No, thank you. Every search has been made."

Not only was the denial of her sister fervent and calm, but her manner and countenance conveyed the impression of truth. Alice left her, inexpressibly relieved; but the conviction, that it must have been Gerard, returned to her in full force. "I wish I could see him!" was her mental exclamation.

And for once fortune favored her wish. As she was dragging her weary limbs along, he came right upon her at the corner of a street. In her eagerness, she clasped his arm with both her hands.

"I am so thankful," she uttered. "I wanted to see you."

"I think you most want to see a doctor, Alice." How ill you look!

"I have cause," she returned. "That bracelet, the diamond, that you were admiring last evening, it has been stolen; it was taken from the room."

"Taken—when?" echoed Mr. Hope, looking her full in the face—as a guilty man would scarcely dare to look.

"Then, or within a few minutes. When Lady Sarah came up from dinner, it was not there."

"Who took it?" he repeated, not yet recovering his surprise.

"I don't know," she faintly said. "It was under my charge. No one else was there."

"You do not wish me to understand that you are suspected?" he burst forth, with genuine feeling. "Their unjust meanness cannot have gone to that length!"

"I trust not, but I am very unhappy. Who could have done it? How could it have gone? I left the room when you did, but I only lingered outside on the stairs, watching—if I may tell the truth—whether you got out safely, and then I returned to it. Yet when Lady Sarah came up from dinner, it was gone."

"And did no one else go into the room?" he repeated. "I met a lady at the door, who asked for you; I sent her up-stairs."

"She went in for a minute. It was my sister, Gerard."

"Oh! indeed, was that your sister? Then she counts as we do, for nobody, in this. It is strange. The bracelet was in the room when I left it—"

"You are sure of it?" interrupted Alice, drawing a long breath of suspense.

"I am. When I reached the door I turned round to take a last look at you, and the diamonds of that particular bracelet gleamed at me from its place on the table."

"O Gerard! is this the truth?"

"It is the truth, on my sacred word of honor," he replied, looking at her agitated face and wondering at her words. "Why else should I say it? Good-by, Alice, I can't stay another moment, for there's somebody coming I don't want to meet."

He was off like a shot, but his words and manner, like her sister's, had conveyed their conviction of innocence to the mind of Alice. She stood still, looking after him in her dreamy wonderment, and was jostled by the passers-by. Which of the two was the real delinquent? one of them it must have been.

A little man was striding about his library with impatient steps. He wore a wadded dressing-gown, handsome once, but remarkably shabby now, and he wrapped it closely around him, though the heat of the weather was intense. But Colonel Hope, large as were his coffers, never spent upon himself a superfluous farthing, especially in the way of personal adornment; and Colonel Hope would not have felt too warm, eased in sheep-skins, for he had spent the best part of his life in India, and was of a chilly nature.

The Colonel had that afternoon been made acquainted with an unpleasant transaction which had occurred in his house. The household termed it a mystery; he, a scandalous robbery; and he had written forthwith to the nearest chief police station, demanding that an officer might be dispatched back with the messenger, to investigate it. So there he was, waiting for their return in impatient expectation, and occasionally halting before the window, to look out on the busy London world.

The officer at length came, and was introduced. The Colonel's wife, Lady Sarah, had joined him then; and they proceeded to give him the outline of the case. A valuable diamond bracelet, recently presented to Lady Sarah by her husband, had disappeared in a singular manner. Miss Seaton, the companion to Lady Sarah, had temporary charge of the jewel-box, and had brought it down the previous evening, Thursday, this being Friday, to the back drawing-room, and laid several pairs of bracelets out on a table, ready for Lady Sarah, who was going to the opera, to choose which she would wear when she came up from dinner. Lady Sarah chose a pair, and put herself, the rest back into the box, which Miss Seaton then locked, and carried to its place up-stairs. In the few minutes that the bracelets lay on the table, the most valuable one, a diamond, disappeared from it.

"I did not want this to be officially investigated; at least, not so quickly," observed Lady Sarah to the officer. "The Colonel wrote for you quite against my wish."

"And so you have let the thief get clear off, and put up with the loss?" cried the Colonel. "Very fine, my lady."

"You see," added her ladyship, explaining to the officer, "Miss Seaton is a young lady of good family, not a common companion; a friend of mine, I may say. She is of feeble constitution, and this affair has so completely upset her, that I fear she will be laid on a sick-bed."

"It won't be my fault if she is," retorted the Colonel. "The loss of a diamond bracelet, worth two or three hundred guineas, is not to be hushed up. They are not to be bought every day, Lady Sarah."

The officer was taken to the room whence the bracelet disappeared. It presented nothing peculiar. It was a back drawing-room, the folding-doors between it and the front room standing open, and the back-window, a large one, looking out upon some flat leads—as did all the row of houses. The officer seemed to take in the points of the double-room at a glance; its door of communication, its two doors opening to the corridor outside, and its windows. He looked at the latches of the two entrance-doors, and he leaned from the front-windows, and he leaned from the one at the back. He next requested to see Miss Seaton, and Lady Sarah fetched her—a delicate girl with a transparent skin, looking almost too weak to walk. She was in a visible tremor, and shook as she stood before the stranger.

He was a man of pleasant manners and speech, and he hastened to reassure her.—"There's nothing to be afraid of, young lady," said he, with a broad smile. "I am not an ogre, though I do believe some timid folks look upon us as such. Just please to compose yourself, and tell me as much as you can recollect of this."

"I put the bracelets out here," began Alice Seaton, laying hold of the table underneath the window, not more to indicate it than to steady herself, for she was almost incapable of standing. "The diamond bracelet, the one lost, I placed here," she added, touching the middle of the table at the back, "and the rest I laid out round, and before it."

"It was worth more than any of the others, I believe," interrupted the official.

"Much more," growled the Colonel.

The officer nodded to himself, and Alice resumed:

"I left the bracelets, and went and sat down at one of the front-windows—"

"With the intervening doors open, I presume?"

"Wide open, as they are now," said Alice, "and the other two doors shut. Lady Sarah came up from dinner almost directly, and then the bracelet was not there."

"Indeed! You are quite certain of that?"

"I am quite certain," interrupted Lady Sarah. "I looked for that bracelet, and, not seeing it, I supposed Miss Seaton had not laid it out. I put on the pair I wished to wear, and placed the others in the box, and saw Miss Seaton lock it."

"Then you did not miss the bracelet at that time?" questioned the officer.

"I did not miss it in one sense, because I did not know it had been put out," returned her ladyship. "I saw it was not there."

"But did you not miss it?" he asked of Miss Seaton.

"I only reached the table as Lady Sarah was closing the lid of the box," she answered. "Lady Frances Chenevix had detained me in the front-room."

"My sister," explained Lady Sarah, "she is on a visit to me, and had come with me up from dinner."

"You say you went and sat in the front-room?" resumed the officer to Alice, in a quicker tone than he had used previously: "will you show me where?"

Alice did not stir, she only turned her head towards the front-room, and pointed to a chair a little drawn away from the window. "In that chair," she said. "It stood as it stands now."

The officer looked baffled. "You must have had the back-room full in view from thence; both the door and the window?"

"Quite so," replied Alice. "If you will sit down in it, you will perceive that I had unobstructed view, and faced the doors of both rooms."

"I perceive so from here. And you saw no one enter?"

"No one did enter. It was impossible they could do so, without my observing it. Had either of the doors been only quietly unlatched, I must have seen."

"And yet the bracelet vanished!" interposed Colonel Hope. "They must have been confounded deep, whoever did it, but thieves are said to possess sleight of hand."

"They are clever enough for it, some of them," observed the officer.

"Rascally villains! I should like to know how they accomplish this."

"So should I," significantly returned the officer. "At present it appears to me incomprehensible."

There was a pause. The officer seemed to muse; and Alice, happening to look up, saw his eyes stealthily studying her face. It did not tend to reassure her.

"Your servants are trustworthy; they have lived with you some time?" resumed the officer, not apparently attaching much importance to what the answer might be.

"Were they all escaped convicts, I don't see that it would throw light on this," retorted Colonel Hope. "If they came into the room to steal the bracelet, Miss Seaton must have seen them."

"From the time you put out the bracelets, to that of the ladies coming up from dinner, how long was it?" inquired the officer of Alice.

"I scarcely know," panted she, for, what with his close looks and his close questions, she was growing less able to answer. "I did not take particular notice of the elapse of time: I was not well yesterday evening."

"Was it half an hour?"

"Yes—I dare say—nearly so."

"Miss Seaton," he continued in a brisk tone, "will you have any objection to take an oath before a magistrate—in private, you know—that no person whatever, except yourself, entered either of these rooms during that period?"

Had she been requested to go before a magistrate and testify that she, herself, was the guilty person, it could scarcely have affected her more. Her cheek grew white, her lips parted, and her eyes assumed a beseeching look of terror. Lady Sarah Hope hastily pushed a chair behind her, and drew her down upon it.

"Really, Alice, you are very foolish to allow yourself to be excited about nothing," she remonstrated: "You would have fallen on the floor in another minute. What harm is there in taking an oath—and in a private room? You are not a charlatan or a mormon—or whatever the people call themselves, who profess to object to oaths, on principle."

"The officer's eyes were still keenly fixed on Alice Seaton's, and she cowered visibly beneath his gaze. "Will you assure me, on your sacred word, that no person did enter the room?" he repeated, in a low firm tone; which somehow carried her to the terrible belief that he believed she was trifling with him.

She looked at him; gasped, and looked again; and then she raised her handkerchief in her hand, and wiped her damp and ashy face.

"I think some one did come in," whispered the officer in her ear; try and recollect. And Alice fell back in hysterics.

Lady Sarah led her from the room, herself speedily returning to it.

"You see how weak and nervous Miss Seaton is," was her remark to the officer, but glancing at her husband. "She has been an invalid for years, and is not strong like other people. I felt sure we should have a scene of some kind, and that is why I wished the investigation not to be gone into hurriedly."

"Don't you think there are good grounds for an investigation, sir?" testily asked Colonel Hope of the officer.

"I must confess I do think so, Colonel," was the reply.

"Of course; you hear, my lady. The difficulty is, how can we obtain the first clue to the mystery?"

"I do not suppose there will be an insuperable difficulty," observed the officer. "I believe I have obtained one."

"You are a clever fellow, then, cried the Colonel, "if you have obtained it here. What is it?"

"Will Lady Sarah allow me to mention it—whatever it may be—without taking offense?" continued the officer, looking at her ladyship.

She bowed her head, wondering much.

"What's the good of standing upon ceremony?" peevishly put in Colonel Hope. "Her ladyship will be as glad as we shall be, to get back her bracelet; more glad, one would think. A clue to the thief! Who can it have been?"

TO BE CONTINUED.