

to me by the custodian, who had this belt specially made for my accommodation. I had important business to transact in Ceylon, and came across hoping to catch this very boat, and so to reach England in time. I did not suppose a soul knew of the strange wealth which I carried round my person, but yesterday I received a queer communication. A native of Besselmir had followed me from the Maharajah's palace. Last night he thrust a paper written in cipher into my hand. This was to inform me that a certain gang of thieves of world-wide reputation knew that I was coming home with the jewels and had resolved to deprive me of them. In what special way I was bringing them to England was still my own secret, but I was already the victim of a conspiracy, and it behoved me to be extra cautious.

"As soon as possible I got on board and stood by the gangway, watching each passenger with intense interest. I was informed by one of the stewards that no fresh passengers, with the exception of myself, had come on board at Colombo, and my fears were just being laid to rest when the steam launch at the last moment shot through the water. I almost gave up hope just then. You can imagine my relief when I discovered that the new passenger was a woman, and not only a woman, but a girl I happen to know all about, for Miss Keele is connected with some of my oldest friends at Kandy."

"Let me look at the belt a little closer," I said. "Ah! what a very curious inner belt!"

It certainly was, being made of countless tiny links of solid gold to give it flexibility, something after the manner of Maltese work. Along its whole length lay a perfect galaxy of precious stones of all sorts and colours, many of which were unknown to me. The glittering blaze of gems was so dazzling that it almost took my breath away. Carbuncles of fiery scarlet lay side by side with amethysts, layers of diamonds, sapphires and pearls. The head of the snake was of exquisitely carved ivory, with an outspread hood of emeralds, and the eyes were two olive-green chrysoberyls that seemed to emit a marvellously opalescent light of their own.

"Well, you are in a strange position," I could not help exclaiming.

"I certainly am," he answered.

"Is it wise to carry the jewels about like that?" I said. "You had much better let me see the second officer and have them put in the bullion room."

"No, no," he cried petulantly; "certainly not. I will keep my promise to my friend, and you have just promised to keep yours. Believe me, the jewels are safe enough. Every extra person who knows of their existence only increases the risk. None of the gang who have threatened to deprive me of my treasure can possibly be on board, and I am safe enough until I reach England."

"All the same, I should not go ashore at any of the ports, if I were you," I said.

"Of course I shan't. The *Morning Star* holds me until we reach England, when I shall immediately take the jewels to the Maharajah."

"All the same, Major," I said, "it behoves you to be very careful to give your confidence to no one."

"Whom am I to give it to?" he asked, looking me in the face. "I am not a man to make friends easily, and beyond yourself and, of course, Miss Keele, who is more or less an old friend already, I shall see little of my fellow passengers."

I longed to say to him, "Beware of Miss Keele," but did not like to do so.

"Well, purser, I have your word to respect my confidence," he said; "you won't breathe a syllable of this to a single soul?"

"You have my word, Major Strangways."

He held out his hand and grasped mine with a firm grip.

I AM pretty tough, and few things disturb my night's repose, but I will confess that on that special night my sleep was broken and restless. Major Strangways was in a strange position. He was carrying home on his person what amounted to half a million of money. A gang of thieves of world-wide reputation knew that he was the bearer of all this treasure. A girl had come on board at the very last moment whose face I had seen three years ago in the dock of the Old Bailey. How queer were these circumstances; and what did they mean? But for the fact of the girl's presence I should scarcely have been uneasy. I knew everyone else on board, but what about the girl? If I mentioned what I suspected about her, I should ruin her for ever. Such a statement would amount to slander. Without corroboration it must not be breathed. The girl might be wronged and innocent. On the other hand, she might be what I did not dare to think. Large gangs of thieves have employed women before now for their more delicate work. She was a hand-

some and most attractive girl — the prize was enormous.

I tossed from side to side, a queer sensation of coming trouble oppressing me. I wished heartily that Major Strangways had never taken me into his confidence. Towards morning I fell into a heavy doze.

THE days sped by without anything special occurring, and, in spite of myself, my fears slumbered. Meanwhile Major Strangways and Miss Keele became the centre of interest on board the *Morning Star*. There is nothing which gives such liveliness to a voyage home as an active flirtation, and we had not left Colombo many days before it was evident to every passenger on board that Major Strangways had lost his heart to the beautiful, bright-eyed, vivacious girl. He followed her about like a shadow, was seldom absent from her side, watched her every movement with burning eyes, was moody and silent when away from her, and raised to the seventh heaven of bliss when in her presence.

Miss Keele, on the other hand, held herself somewhat aloof from the gallant fellow's attentions. She acted on every occasion as a dignified and reserved woman, never for an instant giving herself away or letting herself go.

When we reached Brindisi most of the passengers went on shore, and amongst them Miss Keele. Major Strangways, taking my advice, remained on board. He had said little or nothing to me about the treasure which he carried since that first evening, and I observed now that his mind was occupied with more personal matters. The bright eyes of a certain girl were of greater value to him than the most brilliant diamonds which had ever been excavated out of the depths of the earth.

No fresh passengers came on board at Brindisi, and, having coaled, we proceeded cheerily on our voyage.

At Gibraltar, however, we had quite an influx of fresh arrivals, and amongst them was a wiry-looking, well set up young fellow of two or three and twenty. The moment Major Strangways saw him he uttered an exclamation of astonishment and pleasure, ran up to him, and wrung his hand.

"Why, Morrison," he said, "this is luck! Who would expect to see you here? I thought you were safe at Kandy."

"No wonder, Strangways," was the eager reply. "When last I saw you I had no more intention of coming to England than I had of flying, but I have been sent over by the quickest possible route on important business, was detained at Gibraltar with a nasty touch of jungle fever from which I have now quite recovered. My father will be much put about at the unavoidable delay, but there was no help for it."

Major Strangways eyed him all over with marked approval.

"I am glad you are better and that you are coming home with us," he said. "This is a curious thing, Morrison. I thought when I came on board the *Morning Star* that I should be amongst strangers, but first Miss Keele turns up, and then you. 'Pon my word, I'm right glad to see you."

"Miss Keele? What Miss Keele?" asked the young man.

"Annie Keele. You know her, of course. She has often talked to me about you."

"But this really is incredible," said Morrison. "I had not the slightest idea that either of the Keele girls meant to come to England this year. I saw them both the night before I sailed. You must be joking, Strangways."

"Seeing is believing," said Major Strangways, turning round and for the first time noticing me. He introduced Mr. Morrison, who expressed pleasure at making my acquaintance.

"I'll just go down and find Miss Keele," said the Major after a pause.

"No, let me do that," I interrupted; "you will like to show Mr. Morrison around, and the boat does not start for half an hour. I will find Miss Keele and tell her of your arrival."

"Be sure you say Dick Morrison is on board; she will know all about me," called out our new passenger. "This is luck," I heard him add; "Annie Keele is no end of fun."

"The most beautiful and charming girl I ever came across," was the Major's answer, and then they both sauntered away to the other end of the deck.

I ran down the companion. I found Miss Keele in the ladies' saloon. She was seated by a small table near one of the open portholes writing busily. She looked up as I approached. One of her idiosyncrasies was always to write her letters with red ink. She was a great correspondent, and at every port we stopped at she had always a heavy mail to despatch.

"Oh, purser," she exclaimed. "I am glad to see you! I particularly want to have this letter posted before we start. It is for Colombo; shall I be in time?"

I noticed a slightly worn and anxious expression round her lips. I spoke abruptly.

"The vessel won't start for half an hour," I said; "but I have news for you, Miss Keele."

"Indeed!" she answered.

"Yes, a special friend of yours has just come on board."

"A friend?" she replied. She kept her composure admirably, but I noticed that in spite of every effort a queer, chalky hue was stealing round her lips.

"A friend of mine?" she said again; "but surely, Mr. Conway, you do not know any of my friends?"

"I have only just made the acquaintance of this friend, but Major Strangways knows him well. I allude to Mr. Morrison—Dick Morrison, he calls himself."

"Dick Morrison?" she exclaimed with a start; "Dick?"

"Yes, he has just come on board; he is going to England with us. He is delighted to hear that you are one of the passengers. He will be down in a moment to see you."

"Oh, I must not wait for that," she said, jumping up at once. "Dear old Dick, how more than pleased I shall be to welcome him! What a splendid piece of luck!"

She made a sudden lurch as she spoke against the little table and the bottle of red ink was upset. It rolled down over the blotting paper, over the half-finished letter, and then streamed on to the floor.

"What mischief have I done? Oh, do send for one of the stewards to have it mopped up," she cried; "I must not wait another moment. I must see Dick without delay."

SHE left the room, walking very quickly; her colour was high and her eyes bright. I waited behind her for an instant to give directions about the spilt ink, and the next moment the sound of a loud crash fell on my ears. I rushed out. By some extraordinary accident, which was never explained, Miss Keele, when halfway up the companion, had turned her ankle under her and fallen backwards, her head knocking violently against the polished wood of the floor. She lay at the bottom of the companion now, half insensible. The moment I touched her she opened her eyes.

"Oh, do, please, take me to my cabin at once," she pleaded. There was a passion in her accents which aroused my sympathy. I helped to raise her—a stewardess came in view, we got further assistance, and the girl was taken to her cabin. Cairns, the ship's doctor, was hastily summoned. He came out after a brief examination to say that Miss Keele had hurt her head and twisted her ankle badly, and that she would have to remain perfectly quiet for the rest of the voyage.

"She must stay in her cabin to-day," said the doctor, addressing me. "Of course, she may be well enough to be carried on deck to-morrow. It is strange how her foot slipped for the vessel was not even in motion."

I made no remark of any sort, but, going on deck, told Major Strangways and Mr. Morrison what had happened.

Major Strangways' dismay was very evident. Mr. Morrison expressed regret, and said he hoped that Annie would pull herself together and allow him to see her on the next day.

"It is a great piece of luck, her coming over to England with us," I heard him say to the Major, and then the two men turned aside to pace up and down the hurricane deck.

Two days later we reached the neighbourhood of the Isle of Wight. Our voyage was nearly over, and people who had made friends on the voyage were looking forward, many of them with regret, to the inevitable parting on the morrow.

During these few days Miss Keele had remained in her cabin, sending out many excuses, both to the Major and Mr. Morrison, for her enforced imprisonment. The Major many times suggested that she should be carried on deck, but all his suggestions were negatived by the girl herself, who declared that she was in much pain and would prefer to remain in her cabin. Several of the ladies on board visited her, and their accounts of her cheerfulness, and the brave way in which she bore her too evident sufferings, aroused their admiration.

The last night approached. I had a great deal to do, and went down early to my cabin. I was just about to turn my attention to the ship's accounts when there came a brisk knock at my door, and Strangways entered.

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