

FOR VALUE RECEIVED

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"No, no," she cried; "it is a sin and a shame to hide those beautiful gems away. And, besides, there is no reason why Mr. Forsyth should not know what we are doing. The Count is desirous of disposing of his family jewels, and I have almost agreed to buy them; in fact, I don't think I could possibly part with them now. Are they not altogether magnificent?"

Forsyth examined the cases coolly through his eyeglass. "Stupendous," he said. "And yet it seems to me that I have seen something very like them before. But I recollect that when I last had the pleasure of handling these things there was also a necklace with three large black pearls in it. Probably the Count has forgotten to take it from his pocket. The mistake is quite a natural one amongst such an embarrassing show of riches as this, or perhaps the necklace has been forgotten. Are you quite sure, Count, that you haven't got it in your pocket?"

There was a distinct challenge in the question, a steady gleam in Forsyth's eyes which was not lost upon Kitty Foster. With a sudden strange apprehension that something was about to happen, the girl turned swiftly to the Count. She saw that his face had grown pale, and that his lips were trembling. In a way which was almost mechanical, he passed his hand behind his back and produced another case from a pocket in the tail of his coat.

"Most extraordinary thing on my part," he said, with an uneasy grin. "Just for the moment, I really—er—had actually forgotten the necklace. I hope Mrs. Hammersleigh will forgive me. I hope she will not think I am guilty of keeping anything back."

"She wouldn't," Forsyth said airily. "Anybody can see from the expression of your face that the thing was a pure oversight. And now, if you will excuse me, I should like—"

What Forsyth might have said was cut short by the entrance of the footman, bearing on a salver a card on which a few words were hastily scribbled in pencil. This card the footman handed over to the Russian.

"A gentleman downstairs to see you sir," he said, "on most important business. He said he is very sorry to trouble you at this time of the evening, but he will not detain you more than five minutes. Shall I say you are coming?"

The Russian cast a hasty eye over the pencil message and crushed the card in his hand. He pitched it with apparent carelessness into the fireplace, where it fell short, and lay there unnoticed.

"If you will excuse me one moment," he said to his hostess, "I will leave these things in your hands for a minute or two."

The minutes passed on. There was the sound presently of the closing of the front door, and Forsyth turned to his companions with a genial smile.

"He isn't coming back again," he said. "My dear Kitty, you have seen your passionate patriot for the last time."

III.

"BUT what does it all mean?" Mrs. Hammersleigh protested.

"It means that that man is found out," Forsyth said, coolly. "It means that those gems are no more his than they are mine. As a matter of fact, they are all Lady Courtfield's. Oh, I don't say that Stephanoff is altogether an impostor. I understand he is well born, and all that kind of thing, but the fellow is an impudent

thief, and has been so for years. I have to thank my cousin here for putting me on the track the first time. For when she told me the romantic story of the disinterested patriot and his family gems I began to prick up my ears. You see, it is about six months now since Lady Courtfield lost her jewels. I am one of the few people who know anything about it, because, you see, Lord Courtfield is my chief at Vienna. Lady Courtfield came to England for a long visit, and she brought her gems with her. She didn't keep them in the house, but whenever she needed the stones for wear she always sent a trusted messenger to the bank with a letter or fetched the things herself. After she had been in England some little time she had occasion to return to Vienna in a hurry, and, of course, she could not come away without her diamonds. Judge to her surprise when she went down to the bank to get them to find that they had altogether vanished.

"Stolen!" Mrs. Hammersleigh cried.

"Well, that is what it came to," Forsyth went on. "They had been taken away the day before. The whole thing appears to have been planned in the most careful and thorough manner, and it was worked like this. The day of the robbery happened to be very thick and foggy. About half-past eleven o'clock in the morning a brougham with a pair of horses drove up to the bank, and a footman went into the establishment with a letter to the effect that Lady Courtfield had called for her gems. No great surprise was occasioned by the fact that her ladyship was disinclined to leave her brougham as the day was so wet and foggy. But even then no precautions were neglected, although the footman was wearing the Courtfield livery, and there seemed to be no doubt as to the identity of Lady Courtfield's handwriting as set out in the letter which the footman had carried into the bank. One of the chief cashiers obtained the jewels from the strong-room, and actually carried them himself into the street. There was no mistaking the Courtfield brougham, to say nothing of the black horses each with a white blaze on his face and white fetlock. It was almost too dark to distinguish the features of Lady Courtfield, though the cashier professed to recognise her voice as she looked through the window. He says he gave the jewels into the lady's own hands and asked for a receipt. Lady Courtfield pointed out the fact that he had the receipt already, and that it took the form of the letter which the footman had carried into the bank. At any rate, no suspicion whatever was aroused, and the thieves got off with the jewels, to say nothing of twenty-four hours' start into the bargain.

"Now, a good many people would have made an instant fuss and outcry, but not so Lady Courtfield. She naturally laid an account of her loss before the police, and they advised her to keep the matter entirely to herself. She was quite ready to fall in with the suggestion, because, you see, nothing whatever could be gained by publicity, and there was just the chance that the policy of silence would put the thieves off their guard, and render them more careless in their dealings with the stolen property. So the days went by, and the public got no hint of what had taken place; and doubtless, by degrees, the thieves began to imagine that Lady Courtfield had gone back to Vienna without taking her jewels with her, and that, down to the present moment

CONCLUDED ON PAGE 25.

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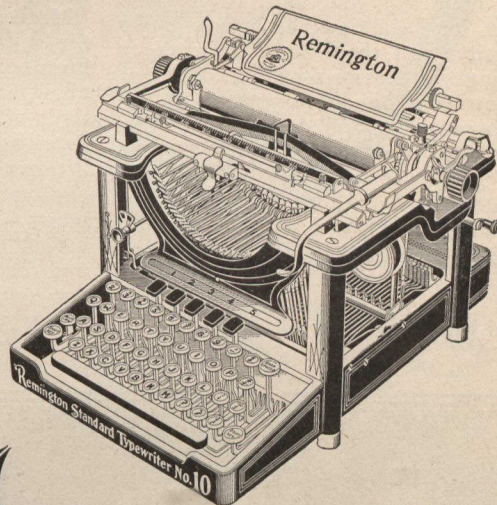
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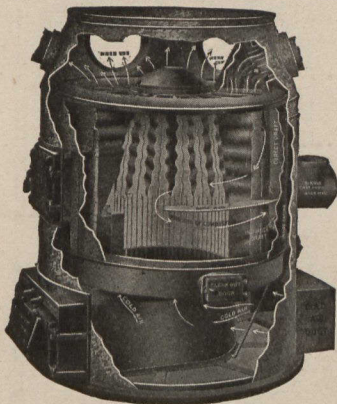


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