

FOR VALUE RECEIVED

The Strange Tale of Some Family Jewels

I.

By FRED. M. WHITE



KITTY FOSTER looked just a little guilty as she met the eye of her cousin. As a rule, she was a girl who did not allow herself to be carried away with any gushes of feminine enthusiasm. But, then, Count Boris Stephanoff was an exceedingly handsome man, and there was something in his melancholy air and dark eyes which made him popular wherever he went. For the rest, he moved in very good society. He was supposed to be exceedingly wealthy, and he certainly posed as a patriot. It was only during the last week or two that he appeared to have singled out Kitty Foster for especial favour, so that people began to ask themselves questions, and Kitty was in a fair way to have her pretty head turned. After all said and done, there is something alluring in the spectacle of a handsome man who is supposed to have left his country at the dictates of his conscience. There were certain people, on the other hand, who proclaimed the man to be no better than a brilliant adventurer, who, on the strength of an elegant manner and some dubiously-acquired wealth, had skilfully managed to engineer his way into society. But society, in its easy-going way, showed no signs of asking questions, and so long as the Count chose to inhabit a suite of expensive rooms at the Carlton, and gave the most excellent dinners, what did the rest matter? If he liked to play at Socialism, there was no reason why he should not indulge his vanity, and if he had an occasional weakness for addressing Anarchist meetings down Peckham Rye, that was his look-out.

It was astonishing in how short a time this handsome, persuasive Russian had made a distinct niche for himself in the fabric of society. He was always so terribly in earnest, too, so that he began to gather around himself certain disciples who deemed it to be the thing to join in the social movement. Chief amongst these satellites was Kitty Foster, to the great disapproval of her cousin, Gerald Forsyth, a distinguished ornament of the British Corps Diplomatique at Vienna. There was something cynical about his smile now, something that aroused Kitty's anger, as he strolled to her side just as Count Stephanoff turned away. Kitty nodded coolly enough, though it was fully six months since she had last met her cousin indeed, she had not the remotest idea till the last moment or two that he was back in England.

"Let us get out of this crush and chat awhile," Forsyth suggested. "I don't suppose you want to dance any more this evening. And, besides, I presume you have given up all those frivolities since you have joined the followers of that fellow, Stephanoff."

"You know nothing about him," Kitty retorted.

"My dear girl, that is a point distinctly in his disfavour," Forsyth said coolly. "I haven't been knocking about the Courts of Europe all these years for nothing. If I don't know a cosmopolitan like that, you may be sure he isn't worth knowing. And there are scores of people here to-night who are equally ignorant."

"The man is a great patriot," Kitty said, warmly.

"Really! Now, wasn't it Dr. Johnson who said that patriotism was the last refuge of a scoundrel? Frankly, my dear child, I don't like it at all. I am sure the less you see of that man the better. Oh, I don't know anything, but my instinct rarely plays me false in such matters. Now look here, Kitty, we have been pretty good friends, and we have had few secrets from one another. Now, tell me honestly—isn't that man making use of you for some purpose?"

Kitty Foster was too honest to deny the truth. In some strange way her cousin had hit upon the correct solution of the problem.

"I won't deny it," she said; "in fact, I don't want to deny it. What I am going to tell you now is distinctly a point in the Count's favour. You would think a man like that would have taken care of his money, seeing that before he was exiled from Russia all his estates were confiscated. He had barely time to get away with certain articles of personal property such as family jewels, and the like. I understand that the Stephanoff stones are very fine indeed; in fact, if they were properly sold they would realise a

fortune. And yet, Count Stephanoff is so deeply in earnest that he is trying to sell those jewels now wholly and solely to provide means for furthering the cause that he has so deeply at heart."

"He told you all this?" Forsyth asked, quietly.

"Certainly he did," Kitty went on. "I don't believe anybody else knows a word about it."

"But why did he tell you?" Forsyth persisted. "You can't buy these precious heirlooms, you know."

Kitty laughed and shook her head. "Of course not," she exclaimed. "But then, you see, I might be in a position to find a purchaser. There are scores of women in society to-day who would give their ears to possess those diamonds, and that, between ourselves, is just the suggestion the Count has made to me. He shrinks with horror at the idea of exposing these things for sale in a public auction-room. He says he would never cease to regret it if he had reason to believe that those historic gems were destined to grace the neck of some pork millionaire's wife from Chicago. What he would like to do is to dispose of these gems by private contract to somebody of real position, or, at any rate, to somebody who has the cause of freedom generally at heart."

"You seem to have learnt your lesson pretty thoroughly," Forsyth said, thoughtfully. "One might actually hear you quoting the very words of our distinguished patriot. And so, after all, to put it plainly, you are about to join the ranks of the honest brokers in society. I suppose you will have a commission if you bring off what the Count considers to be a satisfactory deal?"

"You are absolutely horrid," Kitty said, indignantly. "The thing has never been mentioned. I don't suppose I should even have given it a second thought if the name of Mrs. Hammersleigh had not flashed into my mind."

"Which Hammersleigh is that?" Forsyth asked. "Do you mean the lady who is building herself a house in Park Lane—wife of that ironmonger fellow who made such a pile out in America by sweating his workmen, and then wormed his way into society afterwards by certain glaring acts of what he called philanthropy? I suppose a woman like that would think nothing of a hundred thousand or two."

"That is the Mrs. Hammersleigh I was thinking about," Kitty explained. "Of course, she is vulgar and ostentatious, but, really, she is not a bad sort, and I know that she would very much like to possess a collection of jewels having a history attached to them. We should be doing Mrs. Hammersleigh a kindness, and getting a great deal more money for the gems at the same time. At any rate, I have spoken to Mrs. Hammersleigh about it, and I am going to dine there the day after to-morrow to discuss the thing thoroughly. Count Stephanoff has been asked to join us, and he has promised to bring his family gems with him. You need not be in the least alarmed, my dear cousin. I am acting on the dictates of friendship alone; indeed, I think it very flattering of the Count to take me into his confidence."

Forsyth made no reply for a moment or two. He was apparently thinking deeply. There was a queer dry twinkle in his eye which Kitty did not appear to notice.

"We won't say any more about it," he remarked. "By the way, where is Mrs. Hammersleigh living till her house is finished? I suppose I shall have to give her a call, though we haven't met for such a long time. Don't be at all surprised if I drop in after dinner the evening after to-morrow. You see, if I have a weakness it is for old historic diamonds."

II.

THE elaborate dinner was drawing to a close now. The cigarettes were on the table, and Count Boris Stephanoff bowed gracefully at an intimation from his hostess that he might smoke. The handsome Russian was absolutely in his element now. He had dined wisely and well; indeed, for a passionate patriot, whose whole heart and soul was in the future of his beloved country, he had a very nice discrimination in food and the choice of his wines. He sipped his liqueur luxuriously. He was pleased to approve of the flavour of Mrs. Hammersleigh's cigarettes.

During the whole of the meal nothing whatever

had been said in connection with the diamonds. That matter could be discussed in detail in the drawing-room later on.

Meanwhile, Stephanoff sat there smoking and chatting as if he had not a single care in the world. There was something in his low, sympathetic voice which appealed to his companion.

Mrs. Hammersleigh rose at length, the fair embodiment of good-natured middle age, blessed with a fair digestion, and absolutely unlimited means. For a woman who had begun life in the deeper depths she possessed a deal of inherent good taste; indeed, she was a born expert, as most of the West-End dealers knew. She liked her money's worth, and usually contrived to get it, though, on the present occasion, she was prepared to stretch in the amount of the cheque she was disposed to write for the Stephanoff diamonds. Of historic gems she possessed very few, and here was an opportunity of obtaining a large collection with a minimum of trouble. Suspicious of most people and most things, Mrs. Hammersleigh took absolutely for granted everybody whom she met in society. If a man or woman happened to be there, then their claims to be considered persons of importance were to be taken as a matter of course. Just for the moment, Count Stephanoff stood on a very high pedestal in her estimation indeed. She smiled upon him sweetly.

"You will come up as soon as you are ready," she murmured; "then we will have a look at those wonderful stones."

It was quite half-an-hour later before the Russian lounged up the stairs, and found a seat in the drawing-room. He fell to talking, in his usual easy fashion on a score of topics, not one of which bore the least relationship to the business in hand. Mrs. Hammersleigh began to fidget in her chair uneasily.

"Don't you think we had better get to business?" she suggested.

"Positively I had forgotten all about it," Stephanoff smiled. "Let me play the part of a conjurer."

From various inside pockets he proceeded to produce half-a-dozen shabby-looking flat cases, which he opened one by one and laid on the table by the side of his hostess. The shaded electric lights played on the streams of livid fire, sparkling in all the colours of the rainbow—purple, and green, and gold. Stephanoff had by no means exaggerated the beauty of his gems. They danced and sparkled there like things of life. Mrs. Hammersleigh swooped upon them as a hungry hawk might have pounced upon a pigeon. For once in her life she forgot to bargain. For once she was given over to whole-hearted admiration. Stephanoff stood there, pulling carelessly at his moustache, as if utterly indifferent to the impression which his diamonds had made.

"That is all," he said. "Of course, as you are aware, the great amount of value goes in a small amount of space. Apart from the artistic beauty of the gems, it seems to me that their price is absurdly exaggerated. It is almost incredible to imagine that anybody would be glad to give a hundred and fifty thousand pounds for a few stones like those."

Stephanoff dropped the remark quite casually. And yet there was a finality about the sum he mentioned which admitted of no argument and no compromise. With perfect good breeding he was informing Mrs. Hammersleigh what he wanted for his treasures. And the lady was not disposed to believe that he was putting an exaggerated value on the stones. She was still gazing at them with deepest admiration when the door opened and a footman came in.

"Mr. Gerald Forsyth," he announced.

Forsyth strolled into the room quite coolly and casually, as if his appearance there had been the most natural thing in the world. He nodded coolly enough to Kitty, then he held out his hand warmly to his hostess.

"I seem to have come just at the right time," he said. "Perhaps you will be good enough to introduce me to Count Stephanoff."

The Russian murmured something as to the meeting being a pleasure. Yet, at the same time, he appeared to be somewhat ill-at-ease and disposed to shuffle somewhat over the business which had brought him there this evening. In the most casual way he bent down and began to close the covers of the various cases. Mrs. Hammersleigh held out a fat, protesting hand.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23.