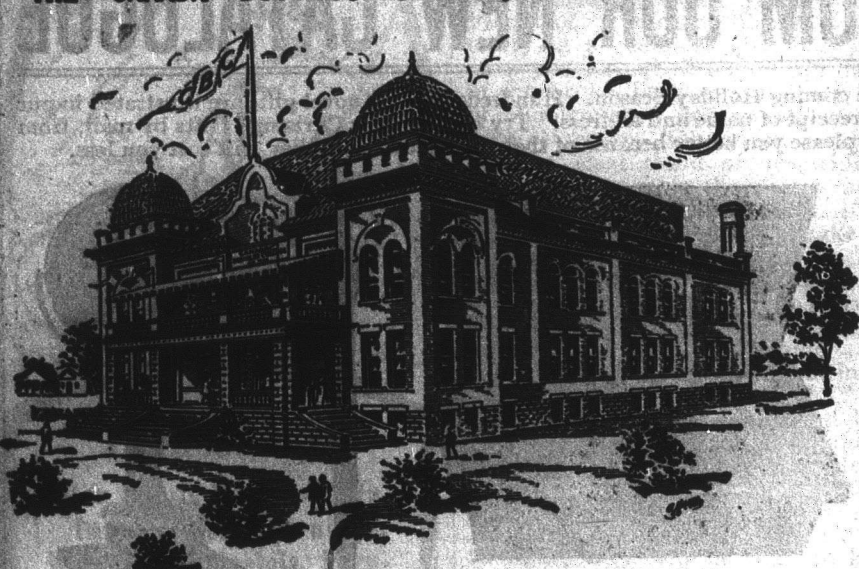


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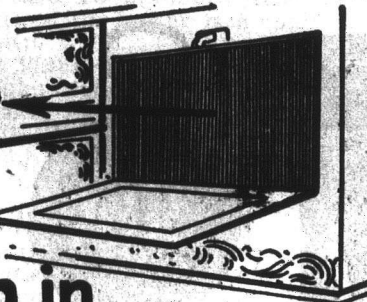
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"Alsie," I said, "what makes you look so dreary to-night?"

She leant her head a minute upon my hands. "Oh, Charlie!" she cried; and there was a world of pent-up sorrow longing to be free in the tone of those two words.

One day John brought an old friend, Captain Cliffe, home to dine with us. My brother was very proud of showing off his beautiful young wife; he was never tired of admiring her himself, and expected the same admiration from every one else. After dinner the conversation turned upon diamonds, their difference, value, beauty, etc. John mentioned the ring belonging to Alsie as being one of the best he had ever seen. Captain Cliffe, who prided himself especially upon being a good judge of diamonds, said he would like to see it.

"Alsie," said my brother, "just ask your maid to bring the ring here, will you?"

Alice was talking to me when her husband spoke. She murmured something about going herself, as she was not quite sure where her keys could be found.

"If it gives you the least trouble, Mrs. Temple," cried Captain Cliffe, "never mind."

She half turned, as though she would have taken him at his word; but John said, eagerly, "It will be no trouble, and I should really like you to see the stone—it is very beautiful."

Alice left the room. She was absent more than ten minutes.

"My dear wife," said John, "never can find her keys."

When Alice returned, I wondered at her colorless face. Her voice was quite steady as she said to Captain Cliffe, "I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long," then, placing the little box in John's hands, she went and stood quietly at the window.

"This ring was a present from Sir Vernon Temple, my uncle," said John, complacently, as he unfastened the snap of the case. "Now, is it not a fine stone?"

Captain Cliffe took the ring from his hands, and held it up to the light. I saw a puzzled, bewildered expression on his face as he did so, while John awaited flattering comments that never came.

"Did Sir Vernon Temple give you this ring?" he asked, turning with a mystified look to John.

"Yes," he replied, "it was his wedding present to my wife. I should imagine that diamond to be worth two or three hundred pounds, at the least."

"It is not worth two hundred farthings," said Captain Cliffe, coolly. "In fact, it is no diamond at all—it is nothing but paste."

"Paste!" cried John. "You must be mad, or dreaming, Cliffe."

"I am neither," replied the Captain. "Take it to any jeweler you like, and he will tell you the same."

"But it is impossible," cried John. "Alsie, come here. Do you hear what Captain Cliffe says? He declares it is no diamond at all, but simply paste."

She looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"You may well look astounded," continued my brother. "I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life; as though my uncle would give you anything so false and trumpery!"

"It is paste, I assure you, Mrs. Temple," said Captain Cliffe, turning to Alice—"a good imitation, I grant you, but that is all. What puzzles me is the beautiful way in which it is mounted; the gold is of the finest quality, and the chasing is some of the finest I have ever seen. I can only wonder that any one should go to so great an expense over paste."

I considered now that it was my turn to speak.

"I do not believe," I said, "that what you say can be possible, Captain Cliffe. See the name of the makers inside the case—Messrs. Bray & Rowley—the first jewelers in England. Do you think it credible for one moment that such a firm would, even if they could, impose on Sir Vernon Temple to such an extent as to charge him two hundred and seventy pounds for a bit of paste,

even supposing, which is highly improbable, that they keep such rubbish."

"I do not think it possible," replied Captain Cliffe. "I never felt more puzzled in my life; but I am certain of what I say."

"Then the stone has been changed since it was bought," I said.

"That is more probable," returned the Captain, eagerly.

"But," interrupted John, "it has never been out of my wife's possession; has it Alsie? It has been locked up in her jewel box. I do not think she has worn it more than once or twice."

"Twice," said Alice, slowly.

"Are your servants all honest?" inquired the Captain.

"None of them have access to my jewel case except my own maid," replied Alice, "and she is quite honest."

"I should recommend you to employ the services of a skillful detective, for I am sure there is a mystery in it," said Captain Cliffe, turning to John. "Either your uncle was cheated or the stone has been changed since it came into your possession. In either case, you ought to have justice. Let me recommend you not to have the matter mentioned before the servants; if the stone has been stolen and the thief is amongst them, it will be better not to put them on their guard."

"I don't believe we have a dishonest servant in the house," said John, with a look of the greatest perplexity on his face; "two of them came from Fossbroke, and have been for years in my uncle's employ and are trustworthy."

"I will answer for my maid," said Alice; "I have known her for more than twelve years."

"Well, it is a strange thing," replied the Captain. "What do you think of it, Mrs. Temple?"

"I—I beg your pardon," replied Alice, starting, "I was not thinking of it."

"You take the loss of a diamond very resignedly," he said, with a smile.

"My wife is a philosopher, Captain," said John. "I am more annoyed than I have ever been in my life before. We treasured that ring—did we not, Alsie?"

"Yes, we did indeed," she replied. I saw Captain Cliffe look earnestly at her for a moment, then his eyes fell, and he seemed anxious to change the subject. Not so John—he could think and speak of nothing else; and nothing would satisfy him except going at once to the shop where it was purchased. Alice said it was too late, but he would go. Captain Cliffe and I accompanied him.

We saw one of the firm—Mr. Rowley. He remembered making the sale to Sir Vernon Temple himself, when the baronet was in London, about three months back. He showed us the entry of the sale, made by himself—diamond ring, price two hundred and seventy pounds. Then John showed it to him, telling him Captain Cliffe declared it was nothing but paste.

"Captain Cliffe is quite right, sir," said Mr. Rowley. "This ring has been tampered with. 'See,' he continued, holding it up to the light, 'any one can tell that the diamond has been removed, and not by a very skilful workman, either. This paste has been put in its place.'"

We saw plainly enough then that some one had altered the stone; the ring bore marks of it.

"Thank you," said John. "I merely wished to know if it were true. You will oblige me, Mr. Rowley, by not naming this matter to any one. I should not like it to come to Sir Vernon Temple's ears. You know, Cliffe," continued John, as we left the shop, "it would never do to let my uncle know anything of this. I must find it out in some way. His first present to Alsie, too! He would think we had taken no care of it."

He went at once to Scotland Yard, acting on Captain Cliffe's advice. There we saw one of the cleverest detectives of the day, to whom we related our story. It was not very long.

"I was with my uncle when he