

Dora Desmond's Diamonds

A COMPLETE STORY BY NORMAN HURST, TELLING OF A DIAMOND MYSTERY WHICH HAD AN UNEXPECTED SOLUTION.

THE girl who came into my office was the prettiest I had ever set eyes upon, and I wondered what duty she intended to ask me to undertake. She had given no name, but now from the recesses of her muff she produced a dainty little case from which she extracted a card and handed it to me with the tips of her daintily gloved fingers. "Miss Dora Desmond, The Duchess Theatre," I read on the fine ivory pasteboard.

I motioned her to a seat and inquired what I could do for her.

"Mr. Weston," she cried, "I have come to you on a very important matter. Some of my jewels have been stolen, and I want you to recover them."

Now I have had a pretty wide experience of actresses and their jewels, and I am always sceptical when I hear of the loss of these gewgaws. Frequently it is no loss at all, or even if it is, only so much stage finery—glittering paste—and the whole scheme is simply one for a big free advertisement.

There is not so much of it now, as the time of which I speak, for the expedient has become too hackneyed, the details too stereotyped, and the whole thing too transparently threadbare to attract more than a passing paragraph, but a dozen years ago, when this case came to me, things were very different, and I naturally fancied that Miss Dora Desmond was following the lead of previous prevaricating sisters of the profession, and meant to prove a good understudy in the part, but her next remark surprised me.

"And I want to avoid all publicity over the matter," she said, with a charming smile. "All I want is to recover my jewels."

"Can you give me any details of the theft?" I asked.

"Yes," she said; "the jewels consist of a diamond spray for the hair, and in the centre is a large perfect emerald."

She emphasised the word "perfect," and I appreciated the intonation of her voice, for I knew how rare a perfect emerald of any size was, it being the one gem most subject to faults and flaws of any of the precious stones.

"I'm Irish, you know," she continued, with the prettiest possible brogue that would have declared the fact for itself had not her eyes and hair already told the same truth, "and therefore Jack—that's my fiance, you know—Jack Rossiter gave me the emerald I'd been almost crying my eyes out for from the day I saw it in Jessmay's window."

"And now it's gone?" I said, for delightful as her talk was as she babbled on, I wanted to get to the real facts of the alleged robbery.

"Yes; It was stolen last night at the theatre," and again, from the recesses of the fur muff, trimmed with a big bunch of Parma violets, she brought out a small, oblong, purple leather jewel-case, and, touching the spring the lid flew up and disclosed a bed of the palest blue velvet and nothingness.

There was the impression where the jewel had rested in its soft azure nest, and that was all.

"I was ready," she said, as she laid the case on the table, "to go on in the second act, all except the finishing touch to my hair and the insertion of this ornament. I had placed it away myself in this case the previous night, after the show, had taken it home myself, had locked it in the safe, and had slept with the key under the pillow."

"But—"

"And," she continued, "I alone knew the combination of the letter lock. I took it out again just before starting to the theatre, and it never left my possession until I opened it to get the spray as I was going on, and found the case empty, as it is now."

"And your room, when you went on in the first act, was it locked?"

"No; my maid was there, a girl whom I can trust implicitly. I know she is as honest as the day. I would not suspect her for a single instant."

"Do you suspect anyone?" I queried.

For a moment or two she hesitated, and I pressed the question.

"Yes," she said.

"Someone at the theatre, of course?"

"Yes; that is why I don't want any publicity or any scandal."

"You can tell me anything in confidence," I said. "In fact, if I am to undertake to recover the jewels for you,

you must give me all the aid in your power by supplying every possible information to assist me in my search. You can repose the same confidence in me as you would in your doctor or your lawyer."

"Well, it's not a nice thing to have to say, especially as I can't prove it," she said; "but I believe Beryl Berristone, the girl who plays lead at the Duchess in 'The Frivolity of the Feminine,' has stolen it."

"Why do you suspect her?"

"Because she was the only person, except my maid, who came into my dressing-room last night when I was on the stage in the first act. There is a period of ten minutes while she is off, and during that time she came into my room, although she perfectly well knew I was acting and she would not be able to see me."

"Did she say why she came in?"

"Oh, yes; she gave a very reasonable excuse. She told my maid she had run out of a certain 'make-up,' and wanted to use mine for a few minutes, and she sat down in front of the mirror and did so."

"Where was the jewel-case at that time?" I queried.

"On the dressing-table."

"Open?"

"No."

"Your maid did not see her touch it?"

"No."

"And yet after she had gone and you returned at the end of the act, you found that the jewels had disappeared."

"Yes."

"But surely it would not be worth her while to steal it. She could not possibly wear it, and it would be dangerous to endeavour to dispose of it," I hazarded.

"Yes, that's quite true," Miss Desmond agreed; "but it must have been she or the maid, and I am certain it was not Nestra."

"Nestra? Is that the maid's name?"

"Yes, Nestra Salviati."

"Then she's Italian."

"Her parents were natives of North Italy; her mother was born in Venice and her father in Milan, but she was born in Paris."

"She has been with you a good time, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, some four or five years. Indeed, ever since I have held a position in the theatrical world that justified my having a maid of my own."

There was no doubt the girl had set me a very difficult task. I could not very well go to Beryl Berristone, the leading lady of the Duchess Theatre, and accuse her of having, in a fit of kleptomania, taken Dora Desmond's diamonds, and, to tell the candid truth, my suspicion ran rather in the direction of the trusted maid. I had more than once found in a wide and varied experience of the world that the trusted servant is the one who commits a breach of that trust. The woman who should be like Caesar's wife, alas! too often resembles Sapphira. Where no suspicion rests is the place, says the detective's brain, to seek for it.

I had already made up my mind that the woman to be shadowed was not the leading actress at the Duchess but the girl of Italian parentage, born in that lazy-going and loosely moralised city, Paris.

While I sat ruminating for a moment my fingers mechanically closed upon the leather jewel-case lying on the table before me, and I took it up and opened it. A tiny speck or two I noticed on the azure velvet made me put a curious question to the girl sitting expectantly opposite.

"Pardon the remark, Miss Desmond," I said, "but tell me, do you smoke cigarettes?"

A pretty little blush flushed up to her shell-like ears as she answered,

"No. I used to have an occasional one, but Jack did not like it, and so I gave it up."

"How long since?" I queried.

"Since the very day he sent me the present that has been stolen."

"You have not had one tiny little cigarette since then—not a single sub rosa little puff, eh?"

"No, honestly. I promised Jack to give it up entirely, and I always keep my word."

"Of course," I answered. "Does Beryl Berristone smoke cigarettes?"

"No. That is to say, I have never seen her do it at the theatre; she may in her own flat for all I know."