

THE CHIEF of the SMUGGLED SAPPHIRES

BY
**GEORGE
BARTON**

she realized what had happened. The natural pallor of her countenance became intensified. A half sob escaped her. The chief looked up, her gray eyes filled with fright. The chief was equal to the occasion.

"You needn't be frightened; there will be no public exposure."

Elsie, happening to glance that way, noticed her aunt's agitation. She walked over.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, madam," replied the chief, with the easy manner which had won for him in the service the title of the Prince of Foitiveness. "Your aunt has forgotten to declare some gems. You will come with me to my office on the dock and the business will be quietly adjusted."

"This is outrageous," began the older woman, recovering herself. But the chief cut her short.

"It is," he observed, "and I'm sorry you attempted it."

The Count came up at this moment, and when he saw what had happened his similitude eyes appeared to be almost turning in their sockets. Instantly Barnes called Clancy to his side. There

the count is desperately in love with Elsie, and I have tried to help his suit. He is to be our guest in the city. Just before the customs officer came aboard, in a burst of gratitude, he bade me wear the sapphires, as a little souvenir of my kindness to him. I naturally felt flattered. I accepted, and—

"Didn't you know they were dutiable?" Barnes asked, sternly.

"I wasn't sure, I thought a present—a thing you wore—"

"But you tried to conceal them under your lace collar."

"The government hasn't any right," she began angrily, and then stopped short, her face as red as a rose.

All the time they were speaking the chief had his eyes on the sapphires, which lay on the desk before him. He now examined them critically by means of a little magnifying glass he had pulled from a drawer of his desk. As he took the instrument from his eye he smiled in an enigmatical manner. He was about to speak when the door burst open suddenly and John Hasson bolted into the room.

"Elsie!" she shouted at sight of the

seeing me without the sapphires."

The Chief was on his feet in an instant.

"My dear madam," he said in his softest tones, "if it is of any moment you can take the sapphires with you, and I will call for them later in the evening."

"Thank you, very much," she said, with the first sign of graciousness she had shown. "I will avail myself of your kind offer."

"Are you going mad?" cried the appraiser, turning to Barnes, after the little party had left the room. "You'll never get those sapphires again."

"I don't care,"

"Don't care? Why?"

"Because," said the chief, speaking deliberately, "those stones are bogus; they're a cheap imitation of the Versailles sapphires."

The appraiser gasped for breath.

"Are you sure?" he asked finally.

"Positive. You don't suppose I've earned a reputation as a gem expert for nothing, do you? My magnifying glass confirmed them. Oxide of cobalt has been used to color those imitations."

"Well," continued the chief, "tell him he's committed an unpardonable offence. That may be permissible in France, but we'll not tolerate it here. Bring the Count to the New Amsterdam at once."

During the next twenty minutes the chief charmed the ladies with the extent and variety of his conversation. Anecdotes flowed from his lips like crystal water from an everlasting spring. So interested did they become that they almost forgot the existence of Count de Vontaine. It was Mrs. Harrington who reverted to the painful topic of the sapphires. The chief was profuse in his protestations:

"No legal censure can attach to you, ladies," he concluded.

"But the dear count?" enquired the older woman.

"The dear count," said the chief, grimly, looking at his watch, "is a very unpunctual man."

At that moment a scuffling sound was heard on the stairway; the door opened and a man entered in the custody of two customs officers. His clothing was disarranged and he showed to disadvantage. He scowled fiercely at Barnes.

"We did," said the little man, with a broad grin.

"Where were they?"

Clancy advanced and laid a long narrow box on the table in front of Barnes. The chief opened it and drew out a magnificent sapphire necklace.

The forty superbly cut stones scintillated beneath the bright rays of the incandescent lights. Mrs. Harrington, Elsie and Hasson involuntarily and almost reverently to the other set hanging about her neck and her emotions found vent in a piercing scream. Elsie was too much astonished for words and Hasson looked on in amazement.

"Tell me your story," said the chief, addressing Clancy and ignoring the enquiring glances about him.

"We followed your instructions literally," replied the man, "and didn't permit him to get out of our sight for a second. The crisis came when he entered the office of Crompton, the gem broker. I posted an officer in the front and one in the rear of the place and then entered in time to see him rip open his cloak and turn the sapphires over to Crompton."

"To humiliate you before these ladies— if such a thing is possible—as you've already humiliated them," thundered the chief. "As for the rest, the law will take care of all that's coming to you."

Five minutes later the prisoner, still languidly stroking his mustache, was in the carriage with the officers on his way to prison. The appraiser entered at this juncture and was invited to join Clancy and the chief in taking the Versailles sapphires to a place of safety.

Mrs. Harrington was in a state of collapse. Every vestige of her normally aggressive manner disappeared. She looked at the chief imploringly.

"We will be disgraced," she cried. "The story of how I was duped by this impostor will make us the laughing stock of society."

The chief walked over and placed his hand gently on her shoulder. He looked in the direction of John Hasson, who held his arms protectively about Elsie, and his face softened.

"Are you reconciled to that?" he asked, pointing to the happy couple.

She nodded her head.

"Then," he said, stoutly, "I'll never give the newspapers the real story of the attempt to smuggle the Versailles sapphires."

And later on, when the reporters visited him, he lied like a gentleman.



THE CHIEF OPENED IT AND DREW OUT A MAGNIFICENT SAPPHIRE NECKLACE.

was a whispered conversation. As it was concluded the Count disappeared in the crowd. Clancy was at his very heels.

"Come right this way, ladies." And the chief led the two women to the little office near the end of the wharf.

After they had been seated the chief gently released the sapphires from Mrs. Harrington's neck and laid them on his desk. They answered perfectly the description of the Versailles sapphires. There were forty of the stones, all cut with the exquisite art of the skilled lapidary. Mrs. Harrington sat silent, with the look of injured dignity common to those who violate the customs laws. The girl buried her face in her hands, weeping. The appraiser, who had entered in the meantime, looked at the gems listlessly. Later he would be called upon for his official opinion. Presently the older woman spoke harshly:

"Now, if you are quite done, perhaps—"

The chief silenced her, sternly but politely.

"Not now, Mrs. Harrington. Your opportunity may come later. Now if you will all step aside for a moment, I should like to speak to Mrs. Harrington alone."

"But I—"

"It's necessary," said the chief, with that compelling wave of the hand.

"Now, Mrs. Harrington," said Barnes, when the others had obeyed, "all I will say is that you should make a full frank and explicit statement."

It took her some time to get her courage screwed up to the striking point. Finally, half tearfully, she burst out:

"The dear count gave them to me."

"The dear count," mimicked Barnes. "Do you know the value of these gems?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," she said.

"I will be frank and tell you only know

girl again.

"John!" she cried with unmistakable delight.

"They would have been in each other's arms had not Mrs. Harrington arisen and interposed."

"Stop," she exclaimed, angrily. The young lawyer retreated before his natural enemy. The girl looked at her aunt defiantly.

"What would Count de Vontaine say?" she queried, turning to Elsie.

"I don't know, and I don't care," cried the girl passionately. "We're not in France now; we're in the United States."

"Bravo," whispered the chief in her ear.

"Sir," said the aunt, turning to those who violate the customs laws. "Where is the Count?" asked the chief.

"The Count," replied Mrs. Harrington, with some dignity, "has an engagement to dine with us at eight o'clock this evening."

"Madam," said the chief, bowing ironically. "I can assure you that the Government would not think of interfering with your social duties. You can call in the morning to dispose of this business."

"Thank you," she said, gratified at his condescending manner. "Come, Elsie."

"I go on one condition," said Elsie, stoutly, "and it is that John—that Mr. Hasson—shall dine with us."

The aunt was about to break out in a rage, but she rechecked, as if making the best of a bad situation.

"All right," she said, doggedly. "As they were leaving the ambitious woman sighed heavily."

"The Count will be disappointed at

"Has been produced by the discreet use of bichromate of potassium."

"Then they're worthless!"

"Well, I shouldn't say that. It probably cost eighty or ninety dollars to make 'em so perfect looking."

"Quite a difference from \$20,000," grumbled the appraiser, adding, after a pause:

"But what about the originals?"

"Meet me at the New Amsterdam at ten to-night," replied the chief significantly, "and you may get the sequel of this seizure."

It was about half-past nine that night when the chief was ushered into Mrs. Harrington's exquisitely appointed apartments at the New Amsterdam. The bogus boston. Elsie was in splendid spirits. The presence of Hasson evidently helped to drive the pallor from her cheeks. Hasson seemed half defiant. Mrs. Harrington looked uncomfortable.

"Where's the Count?" queried the Chief after the first greetings were over.

The Count failed to keep his appointment," said Mrs. Harrington stiffly.

No one appeared to share her disappointment over this catastrophe. Indeed, Elsie and John, by a species of wireless telegraphy, were exchanging glances which were distinctly charged with joy.

"May I use your telephone?" asked Barnes.

Without waiting for a reply he lifted the receiver and called up the custom house.

"Is that you, Con?" he asked.

The reply must have been in the affirmative, for he immediately followed it with another question:

"Can you get into communication with Count de Vontaine?"

but refused to notice the other occupants of the room. Cornelius Clancy, who brought up the rear of this strange group, saluted his chief.

"The count!" gasped Mrs. Harrington at the prisoner.

"Did you get the gems?" asked Barnes eagerly, not noticing this salutation.

"Was there a struggle?"

"Yes," replied Clancy, modestly; "but it was one-sided. Crompton has already been turned over to the United States district attorney."

"What does this mean," cried Mrs. Harrington, unable to suppress herself any longer.

"It means," said Barnes sternly, "that your social ambition has made you the credulous victim of a scoundrel. This man has been using you and your niece for his own base purposes. He has forced those counterfeit gems on you to deflect suspicion from himself and to enable him to escape with the real sapphires."

"Counterfeit!" gasped the woman.

She gazed fixedly at the Count, but he did not return her glance. He seemed bored. A small, white, manicured hand, very much be-ringed, was raised languidly and drawn across a narrow forehead. The next moment the same hand wearily stroked a luxuriant black mustache, betraying by the movement two rows of even, white, glistening teeth.

"Counterfeit!" gasped the woman for the second time.

"Yes, counterfeit!" cried the chief, his voice rising with his indignation. "The man himself is a counterfeit. He's no Frenchman. He's no chateau, he's no count. The cables have been working, and I find the title he claims is extinct. Stripper of his Parisian top hat, his Parisian cloak, and his Parisian manner, you'll find him to be, as I've found him to be—after peering my big eye of information together—plain 'Bill' Snyder, the best dressed, the best groomed, and the most ingenious professional smuggler of the present generation."

"What'd you bring me here for?" asked the erstwhile Count, yawning.

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