

THE DIAMOND THIEF.

From time to time the general public reads of some wonderful jewel robbery, and marvels at the sagacity of those thieves who prefer to turn their talents, often of the highest order, to a dishonest account, when they might make an honourable and profitable livelihood. But there have been one or two audacious robberies which have never found their way into the newspapers, from some cause or another best known by the losers. Some days ago we had the pleasure of meeting one of the partners in a wholesale jewelry business, dealing principally with the better class of West End shops, though they are always ready to accept a private customer. In course of time the conversation turned upon jewel robberies; and for something over two hours my new acquaintance kept us interested while he detailed more than one audacious plot by which the firm had suffered loss. After the silence which followed a tale of more than usual interest, one of the circle asked the narrator if ever private customers were tempted to rob them. The answer was the following story:

Of course we do occasionally have cases of that kind, said the narrator; though usually they are quickly detected. Occasionally an aristocratic customer—some one with plenty of money—is tempted to purloin a valuable ornament. You see kleptomania is a luxury which only the rich can afford to indulge in. I remember once waiting upon a lady in Park Lane with a rare lot of ornaments, out of which she selected some hundreds of pounds worth. A diamond and Limoges enamel star, which she had particularly admired, was missing when I came to repack my cases. A younger man would have lost his head, and there would have been a scene, ending, perhaps, in a prosecution, which, let me tell you, under such circumstances would have done us incredible harm. But, as the Yankees say, "I had been there before." All I had to do was to make out a list of the things purchased and those kept for approval; the diamond star figuring prominently at the foot of the list. My customer looked at me a moment, half afraid, till I reminded her, as suavely as possible, that she had slipped it in her pocket in a moment of temporary abstraction. Of course she saw what I meant, and acknowledged her blunder very prettily.

But perhaps the greatest loss we ever had was in a measure due to one of the best customers of the firm, a member of the Upper House, with a town residence in Arlington Street, and no one knows how many seats and estates in different parts of the country. Probably you all remember his daughter being married some four years ago—at St Peter's, Eaton Square, or the Savoy Chapel, I forget which, with a royal personage to sign the register, and wedding presents from Her Majesty downwards. His lordship is a very rich man, and his presents were worth a small fortune. But they cost him more than he anticipated.

I was in the counting-house one morning some two months before this marriage came off, discussing it with my partner, both wondering if we should have an order from the earl, when a slim-looking gentleman came in and laid a note upon the table. It was an order from the earl to repair at once to Arlington Street with a *parure* of diamonds, of which we make a specialty. I arranged to call a little later in the day, a fact of which I informed the slim gentleman. But towards the afternoon I received another by the same hand advising me that his lordship had left town suddenly for M—Castle, his seat in Leicestershire, and that I was to come down there for instruction in the course of the following day. I remember being somewhat annoyed at the time, for I had an important family engagement on the morrow; but I had to swallow my impatience and inform the messenger that I would do myself the honour of obeying his lordship's commands. My partner was in the inner office, and it was my duty to show him the letter. Judge of my surprise when I could find neither of the earl's notes, though I distinctly remembered placing the second one on the desk before me whilst I was giving the messenger my reply. I thought little of it at the time, though how their loss affected us afterwards you shall hear.

I went down to M—the following day with more valuables than I have ever carried before or since. I must have had at least thirty thousand pounds' worth about me altogether. But I am not a nervous man, though men in my line have been robbed in a railway carriage before now.

I knew the earl very well by sight, though I had never had a personal interview with him before. I had occasionally seen him in the counting-house, and had listened to his peculiarly grating voice—a deep stern voice, with a rough rasp in it like the noise of a saw—a voice I could pick out amongst a thousand. I had no occasion to find fault with my reception: an elegant luncheon awaited me in the dining-room, and his lordship's own man—the slim gentleman aforesaid—was told off to administer to my creature comforts. He was extremely chatty and agreeable, without being the least forward, as 'gentlemen's gentlemen' too often are; and asked a variety of questions about my business, commiserating me upon the anxiety I must suffer in travelling the country with so vast and tempting treasures in my possession.

I will not detain you with the result of my inter-

view with the earl and his daughter. I was fortunate enough to have in my possession the precise ornaments they required; and as I returned to town that night, well pleased with my journey, and the big cheque in my pocket, I congratulated myself that my treasures were so considerably lightened since the morning. It was more than twelve months before I heard from the earl again.

It was one dull November, with a fog beginning to settle over the city, so dense that we had lighted the gas, though it was not long past eleven, when a visitor was ushered into the counting-house—no one else than the slim gentleman, who gave me a smiling recognition and held out a note for my perusal. I was somewhat astonished and not a little pleased when I saw that it was an order from his lordship for a *parure* of diamonds; in fact, almost the same order as I had received nearly eighteen months ago. In a jocular way I pointed out this resemblance to the slim gentleman. To my surprise, his face became grave, and he looked around cautiously, as if afraid of eavesdroppers, and coming a little closer, began in a significant tone: "Of course you understand, sir, that confidential servants are often obliged to know things that it is as well other people should be ignorant of. Every noble family has its skelton, and our family has theirs. Now in the first place have you another suite of diamonds the counterpart of the others my lord purchased?"

I intimated that we had such another suite, as the earl must remember; but my visitor waived the question aside impatiently.

"You might possibly have sold it," he said; "and there is no time to make another. The fact is, Lady R—, who is staying with us now, must wear those jewels at a dance we are giving to-morrow night. And this is where the difficulty comes in, for they have been stolen!"

"Good gracious, you don't say so!—But why make a mystery of the matter?"

"Because we happen to know who the thief is!" said the valet, dropping his voice still lower. "To a great extent I was instrumental in detecting the delinquent myself. It is a deplorable affair, a shocking affair—such a promising young gentleman too.—But I am saying too much, perhaps.—Mr.— we must have those jewels at any price. If not, one of the highest families in the land will be terribly compromised. Do not be at Arlington Street later than half-past two."

I always had a weakness for a mystery, and here was one ready to my hand. I could understand, from my visitor's little indiscretion, that some terrible scandal had happened, though I admired the fellow's cautiousness in checking himself before he had said too much. Under the circumstances, I need not tell you that my cab reached Arlington Street on the stroke of half-past two.

The drawing-room blinds were down; the shutters, too, all over the house, with the exception of the dining room. In the clearer atmosphere it was fairly light enough to do without gas. In the front dining-room a young man was standing before the fire, who pleasantly introduced himself to me as the Honourable Claude V—, a name I knew well enough though I had never seen the young gentleman before. In spite of his naturally amiable manner, I thought he seemed anxious and ill at ease, frequently breaking off in the middle of some observation to listen to the sound of voices, which came plainly enough from behind the thin ornamental partition dividing the two rooms, and whence the earl's peculiar grating tones could be heard every now and then raised in something like anger. I could catch from time to time allusions to diamonds, and occasionally the word "thief" was used in tones of immeasurable contempt. In the midst of this the door opened and the gentlemanly valet walked in. Even he seemed somewhat restless and uneasy, a circumstance I should scarcely have expected from a person of his unusually even temperament. He held in his hand an open telegram, and a letter for me, the ink still wet upon the envelope. I tore it open, and read that his lordship had suddenly been summoned to M—Castle, the valet at the same time showing me the telegram, signed "Mary."

"You will have to go down to M—to-morrow, sir," he said to me; "unless perhaps you have no objection to allowing the earl to take the jewels with him. However, for the present that matters but little."

I immediately expressed my willingness to comply with this arrangement. With seeming reluctance, the valet took my bag, and presently I heard the sound of conversation resumed in the adjoining apartment.

"Thank goodness, there is a way out of it," I heard the earl say.—"No, I will not look at anything else now. Take the bag back to Mr.—at once.—And, Evans, I must have a cab immediately."

"You are usually cautious in your profession," remarked the Honourable Claude to me, as I made a hurried inventory of various costly nicknacks I had brought with me on the chance of a sale, for even confidential servants are not always to be trusted.—"Nothing missing, I trust?"

There was nothing missing, as I smilingly hastened to reply, though my answer was drowned by the rattle of a cab on the pavement outside. I heard the earl's voice in the hall admonishing the faithful

Evans, and caught a glimpse of his well-known figure as he climbed into the cab. As the horse sped rapidly away, my companion heaved a voluntary sigh of relief.

"Of course you have guessed there is something wrong, Mr.—," he said gravely, "I am not at liberty to favour you with any details; but you will be doing us all a favour by observing a discreet silence concerning everything that you may have heard the last half-hour."

Needless to say that I promised, also that I fully intended to adhere to that resolution. I stayed chatting with my aristocratic acquaintance for some time, considerably taken by his pleasant chatter and keen observation on men and things. Judge of my surprise when, on looking at my watch, I found it to be past four. I had already missed one appointment by my carelessness, and I excused myself hurriedly; and half an hour later I was back again at our counting-house in Hatton Garden. As I drove up, another cab stopped at the door, and out of it descended a figure which filled me with astonishment. It was the Earl of—himself! He seized me hurriedly by the arm, contrary to his usual dignified manner and bearing, and almost forced me into the office. Once there, he lost no time in telling me the occasion for his errand, a narrative which, as it proceeded, more than confirmed my worst fears.

"I thought it best not to telegraph you," he commenced; "electric messages get into suspicious hands occasionally, so I came up from M—straight here."

"You have only just arrived in town, my lord?" I asked feebly. "Do I understand that?"

"I reached Paddington scarcely half an hour ago. The fact is the jewels I had from you for my daughter have been stolen."

"So I have been informed," I replied mechanically, "only half an hour ago."

"So you have been told! Where on earth did you get your information?"

As coherently as I could, I told my tale; and fortunately was able to produce the two notes in evidence of my sanity, which up to this time had been open to argument.

The earl put on his gold-rimmed spectacles and read them with a judicial air. "I am afraid, very much afraid, you have been the victim of a cleverly planned robbery. Yesterday morning Evans came to me and asked for two days' holiday, a favor which I need not tell you was readily granted. It was only last night that my daughter, who is staying at M—with her husband, discovered by the merest accident that she had been robbed. Of course none of us suspected Evans. I should not have suspected it now, if I had not seen you; and my object in coming here was to get a technical description of the missing gems for the use of the Scotland Yard people. What a pity I did not come earlier!"

By this time I was in a frame of mind suspicious enough to make me suspect any one, including the earl himself. I pointed out to him, none too courteously, the fact of the letters, and my conversation with the Honourable Claude.

"I have a good memory, Mr.—," said my visitor kindly, "and I recognise these letters as the two I wrote to you prior to my daughter's marriage.—Evans, I understand, delivered both of them, and must have purloined them whilst your back was turned, with a view to this very robbery. It is true that I have ason Claude, only, unfortunately for your theory, he is at present with his regiment in the West Indies."

"But I could have sworn to your lordship's figure as I saw you getting into the cab; and, pardon me, I could make oath to your voice amongst a million."

"You recall a little circumstance I had quite forgotten," the earl replied in amused retrospection. "Evans, I regret to say, was uncommonly clever at mimicry; indeed, on one occasion I am informed that he presumed to counterfeit my dress and general style, even my voice, for the amusement of a select circle of friends, in a manner which filled them with astonishment. They say, like master like man, Mr.—; but it is very sad to see so clever a man so great a rascal.—And now, as I am in a measure the author of your loss, and as we are, moreover, comrades in misfortune, pray, consider my advice, need I say my purse likewise, at your convenience."

We drove to Scotland Yard together and laid our complaint before the authorities. They were very wise and confident; but, as I imagined, the real culprit was never captured. The "Honourable Claude" was picked up some few months later, but he turned out to be only a cat's-paw in the hands of the older and abler scoundrel. But the astute Evans, the successful mimic, was never found; and those two splendid *parures* remain lost to the world to this day. But in consequence of the daring robbery being committed under his own roof, the Earl of—insisted upon making good our loss, as a kind of penalty, he said, for placing a premium upon temptation.

"How did they get into the earl's town-house in his absence?" asked a listener when the narrative had concluded.

"That was the easiest part of all. Of course, the town-house was only used for a month or two in the year, and then left in charge of an aged caretaker, all the valuables being removed. If a confidential servant wished the use of a room for an hour or two, the rest is easily managed."