

# FROM THE MALE STATION

By L. J. BEESTON

## VIII---Mrs. Penfound's Diamond

"A love element in a case, my dear Penfound, always makes it doubly attractive to me," once remarked my friend Hogz Tredways.

For this reason he was very cheerful when Miss Joy Pruden came into his sitting-room at Half Moon street one evening, came there to plead for her lover, Austin Cargill, and did plead with her dark eyes brimming with tears, and her red lips quivering.

At first she looked at me rather doubtfully.

"My friend the Reverend Horace Penfound, Chaplain of Chalmers Prison," announced Tredways reassuringly. "It is he who brings me for investigation those instances where persons have suffered without cause, in his belief. So pray speak out."

Our charming visitor obeyed, her brave young voice acquiring strength as she went on. Yet her story was bald of drama. All it amounted to was this: Cargill was a young man who moved in a good social orbit. He had a passion for auction bridge which was not backed up by his playing ability. He parted company with a considerable sum of money and at length found for an inseparable companion debt—hollow-eyed and full of evil.

So evil indeed, that one dark night Cargill was found in a house belonging to a Mr. and Mrs. Penfound, in Fairleigh street, Buckingham Palace Road, and removed from the lady's jewels, a beautiful red diamond, Cargill got away with it and took passage on a channel boat where he made the acquaintance of one of those sharks who can tell instantly the nervous passenger bolting for his liberty. This customer paid him three hundred pounds for the stolen jewel. Cargill landed all right, spent the money, and was arrested soon afterward. He received a term of three years imprisonment, a few of which had passed.

Tredways listened with glowing disapproval. "This was not at all what we were looking for."

"My dear young lady," he answered deprecatingly, "have you not mistaken the part I sometimes fill? I am not a missionary to reclaim lost souls. I seek to clear the innocent."

"And Austin is innocent?" was the astonishing reply.

I chuckled. "But you admitted that he entered the house stealthily and took the diamond?"

"Oh, yes."

"And that he ran away with it? And that he sold it to some rascally receiver of stolen goods? And that he spent the money?"

"Certainly, I admit all that. It is no use doing otherwise. Austin was innocent," continued our visitor resolutely, "and for the simple reason that Mrs. Penfound had given him the diamond."

"Ah!" said Tredways, with a touch of irony. "They story is now beginning."

"On the day when he left England, Austin telephoned to me a few hurried sentences of good-bye. He was going away for a few weeks. This was very sudden to me, and more troubling than the message was the uneasiness in his voice. I had known for some time that he was in difficulty. Fearing that something untoward had occurred, I would not accept just a mere verbal good-bye and I went round to him at once without his expecting me. And almost the first thing I noticed on entering his room was a red diamond on his table-cover. He had just removed it from its setting in a gold pendant."

"I imagined at first that it was a ruby, a very beautiful ruby, and I tried to laugh away my concern, but it was very evident to me that something was wrong. To be brief, Mr. Tredways, I insisted on being told the entire truth, and I got it."

Austin had allowed himself to sink into a slough of debt, and the situation was critical. Only timely help extending over a few weeks could save his future from being ruined. During the period of his sinking he had formed a close and perfectly nice friendship with Mrs. Penfound, the wife of Colonel Penfound. To this lady, in a burst of gloomy feeling, he had confided his trouble. She wished to help him. The situation was delicate. The colonel, her elderly husband, is an intensely jealous man, by no means appreciating any friendship which his wife forms with any one younger than himself.

But the lady, in her anxiety to assist poor Austin, invented what I felt at the time was a most imprudent plan. Austin had admired a lustrous red diamond which Colonel Penfound had brought from India and given to his wife. She is not over-fond of wearing jewelry, and the diamond was often in her casket for weeks undisturbed. She wished to lend this to Austin that he might make use of it to tide himself over the critical weeks. But she dared not do so openly. Such an act, if discovered, would be displeasing to the colonel. Penfound in the highest degree, and might be followed by the most unpleasant consequences.

"In these circumstances a most risky scheme was evolved. It was that Austin should help himself to the jewel! Could anything be more foolish, more insane? He knew the house perfectly well, of course. He was to enter it at a late hour one evening, surreptitiously enter it, from the garden, the back garden entrance. The diamond would be waiting for him in the lady's boudoir, in a drawer there, in the casket."

"I will do Austin the justice to say that he shrank from it for some time

until circumstances goaded him to desperation. At that juncture he received a few lines from Mrs. Penfound in which she mentioned a certain evening when his task would be relatively easy. After that she could promise nothing. She pointed out the risk she ran in writing and desired that Austin should burn the note after reading it. Austin showed me this letter, then threw it into the fire before my eyes. By that time he had acted upon it, of course, had taken the jewel. Certainly he ought to have destroyed the letter the moment after receiving it; but one can pardon his hesitation there, if found in possession of the diamond, Mrs. Penfound's letter would save him."

"But Cargill would have acted disgracefully in producing the lady's letter," I caught, "commented Tredways sternly."

"I assume that he had to take the consequences of discovery without breathing a syllable."

"Yes, of course," admitted Miss Pruden reluctantly. "He stated as much, indeed. The lady's honor demanded a perfect silence if any hint spoiled the working of her mistakenly kind idea. And such a hint swiftly found its way to the diamond. Most unlookingly Colonel Penfound asked to see the diamond with a view to having it reset. That is the sort of coincidence which always occurs. He asked for it soon after its disappearance. The supposed thief at once came to light. Austin suffered, speaking no word, as in honor bound."

"His one creditable part in the affair," commented Tredways, "is that he must have been very hard for you to control your naturally intense longing to speak."

"Austin would never have forgiven me. Still, I think, I should have spoken, but what means had I to prove the facts?"

"None of course. Oh, if you had kept that letter, now!"

He looked at the girl steadily as he spoke and a deep flush of color streamed over her face.

"Well," she stammered at length, "I did."

Tredways threw back his head with a chuckle. "I thought so," he laughed. "I suppose you whipped it off the line the moment Cargill's back was turned."

"As you may see from its scorched appearance," was the demure response.

Tredways spread out the note and read aloud. "Unless you come to me tonight, my dear friend, I can promise you nothing later on. The suspense is very trying to me. Why hesitate? Am I not at liberty to lend or even to give you what is my own? Be brave. Remember—the garden entrance. Follow the quiet road at the back of the house. It has a border of linden trees. Count them carefully. The seventeenth tree is immediately behind the garden of the house. That will be your sure guide. You will find the door unfastened."

"Ah, the lady, very wisely, has not signed her note!" Tredways added. "Naturally, indeed. Nor did Austin tell me her name, even. He was so profoundly anxious not to compromise her that he declined to give her name. But, of course, it came out afterward."

Tredways leaned back and drummed with finger-tips upon his table. "A most interesting and most unusual story," said he after a long pause, during which his eyes never left our pretty visitor's face.

"Now, tell me, Miss Pruden, why have you come here?"

"Can you ask me that? Austin is in prison, and he is innocent. There is no one to fight for him but myself."

"Exactly," was Tredways' terse response. "Youself. It is a matter quite of your usual lines. There is no entanglement of mystery here to unravel. You are not going to ask me to approach Colonel Penfound, a very thoughtless wife. You must do that yourself. Of course, the situation palpitates with delicacy. Silence is her one policy; it is that of Austin Cargill. He swears he is innocent, but the grimace. You must imitate his example."

"But the situation is so frightful," pleaded the girl, clasping her gloved hands. "I hoped so that you would suggest a remedy."

"And I hoped that you would finish your story without my persuasion," answered Tredways softly. "My dear young lady, it is so seldom that a client of mine unravels his tale of crime without keeping something back. Alas, you are no exception. Your excellent sense never anticipated my taking action with such simplicity. If interesting material to work upon."

Our visitor dropped confused eyes. Her bosom heaved as she drew a deep breath.

"There was a sequel," she answered with an effort. "Mrs. Penfound had insured her diamond for two thousand pounds."

Tredways half rose from his chair. "And she applied for the money?" he snapped.

"Every shilling of it; and got it."

"Ah!"

"In the circumstances she ought not to have done that," went on Miss Pruden, pluckily. "Indeed, it seems to me a serious offense. But I am inclined to look deeper. The suspicion that Austin has been made her dupe is one I cannot dismiss."

Tredways commenced to drum the table again with his finger ends. "But it surely gives me a hold upon him," suggested our little visitor. "If I got to her now—"

"Which you will not do on any account whatever," Tredways cut in. "Instead of calling into a reserve-bank, she will straighten out like a serpent. What are your proofs? That unsigned paper is without value. The first thing you'll know is that Mrs. Penfound will hit you for blackmail. Leave the matter with me. There are one or two features which rather fascinate me."

Three days later Tredways phoned me, asking me to go round to his place in Half Moon street. As I had a week's

leave in town I was able to oblige him. "Always a sportsman, Frankie," he greeted me. "I have found something very interesting about Mrs. Penfound."

"Indeed?" As I had thought a good deal about the case I was genuinely pleased.

"Yes," he chuckled. "The lady is a patron of foreign missions."

"Good heavens, Tredways! What has that to do with it?"

"Much. It affords you a chance of seeing her. You are always collecting for something of the sort. What have you on hand?"

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