Marsh Richard

The Datchet Diamonds

Richard Marsh

The Datchet Diamonds

Marsh R.

The Datchet Diamonds / R. Marsh — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Marsh Richard
The Datchet Diamonds

CHAPTER I
TWO MEN AND A MAID

The band struck up a waltz. It chanced to be the one which they had last danced together at the Dome. How well he had danced, and how guilty she had felt! Conscious of what almost amounted to a sense of impropriety! Charlie had taken her; it was Charlie who had made her go-but then, in some eyes, Miss Wentworth might not have been regarded as the most unimpeachable of chaperons. That Cyril, for instance, would have had strong opinions of his own upon that point, Miss Strong was well aware.

While Miss Strong listened, thinking of the last time she had heard that waltz, the man with whom she had danced it stood, all at once, in front of her. She had half expected that it would be so-half had feared it. It was not the first time they had encountered each other on the pier; Miss Strong had already begun to more than suspect that the chance of encountering her was the magnet which drew Mr. Lawrence through the turnstiles. She did not wish to meet him; she assured herself that she did not wish to meet him. But, on the other hand, she did not wish to go out of her way so as to seem to run away from him.

The acquaintance had begun on the top of the Devil's Dyke in the middle of a shower of rain. Miss Strong, feeling in want of occupation, and, to speak the truth, a little in the blues, had gone, on an unpromising afternoon in April, on the spur of the moment, and in something like a temper, on a solitary excursion to the Devil's Dyke. On the Downs the wind blew great guns. She could hardly stand against it. Yet it did her good, for it suited her mood. She struggled on over the slopes, past Poynings, when, suddenly-she, in her abstraction, having paid no heed to the weather, and expecting nothing of the kind-it came down a perfect deluge of rain. She had a walking-stick, but neither mackintosh nor umbrella. There seemed every likelihood of her having to return like a drowned rat to Brighton, when, with the appropriateness of a fairy tale, some one came rushing to her with an umbrella in his hand. She could hardly refuse the proffered shelter, and the consequence was that the owner of the umbrella escorted her first to the hotel, then to the station, and afterwards to Brighton. Nor, after such services had been rendered, when they parted at the station did she think it necessary to inform him that, not under any circumstances, was he to notice her again; besides, from what she had seen of him, she rather liked the man. So, when, two days afterwards, he stopped her on the pier to ask if she had suffered any ill-effects from her exposure, it took her some five-and-twenty minutes to explain that she had not. There were other meetings, mostly on the pier; and then, as a climax, that Masonic Ball at the Dome. She danced with him five times! She felt all the time that she ought not; she knew that she would not have done it if Cyril had been there. Miss Wentworth, introduced by Miss Strong, danced with him twice, and when asked by Miss Strong if she thought that she-Miss Strong-ought to have three dances with him Miss Wentworth declared that she did not see why, if she liked, she should not have thirty. So Miss Strong had five-which shows that Miss Wentworth's notions of the duties of a chaperon were vague.

And now the band was striking up that identical waltz; and there was Mr. Lawrence standing in front of the lady with whom he had danced it.

"I believe that that was ours, Miss Strong," he said.

"I think it was."

He was holding her hand in his, and looking at her with something in his eyes which there and then she told herself would never do. They threaded their way through the crowd of people towards the head of the pier, saying little, which was worse than saying much. Although Charlie had been working, Miss Strong wished she had stayed at home with her; it would have been better than this. A sense of pending peril made her positively nervous; she wanted to get away from her companion, and yet for the moment she did not see her way to do it.

Beyond doubt Mr. Lawrence was not a man in whose favour nothing could be said. He was of medium height, had a good figure, and held himself well. He was very fair, with a slight moustache, and a mouth which was firm and resolute. His eyes were blue-a light, bright blue-beautiful eyes they were, but scarcely of the kind which could correctly be described as sympathetic. His complexion was almost like a girl's, it was so pink and white; he seemed the picture of health. His manners were peculiarly gentle. He moved noiselessly, without any appearance of exertion. His voice, though soft, was of so penetrating a quality and so completely under control that, without betraying by any movement of his lips the fact that he was speaking, he could make his faintest whisper audible in a way which was quite uncanny. Whatever his dress might be, on him it always seemed unobtrusive; indeed, the strangest thing about the man was that, while he always seemed to be the most retiring of human beings, in reality he was one of the most difficult to be rid of, as Miss Strong was finding now. More than once, just as she was about to give him his dismissal, he managed to prevent her doing so in a manner which, while she found it impossible to resent it, was not by any means to her taste. Finally, finding it difficult to be rid of him in any other way, and being, for some reason which she would herself have found it difficult to put into words, unusually anxious to be freed from his companionship, she resolved, in desperation, to leave the pier. She acquainted him with her determination to be off, and then, immediately afterwards, not a little to her surprise and a good deal to her disgust, she found herself walking towards the pier-gates with him at her side. Miss Strong's wish had been to part from him there and then; but again he had managed to prevent the actual expression of her wish, and it seemed plain that she was still to be saddled with his society, at any rate, as far as the gates.

Before they had gone half-way down the pier Miss Strong had cause to regret that she had not shown a trifle more firmness, for she saw advancing towards her a figure which, at the instant, she almost felt that she knew too well. It was Cyril Paxton. The worst of it was that she was not clear in her own mind as to what it would be best for her to do-the relations between herself and Mr. Paxton were of so curious a character. She saw that Mr. Paxton's recognition of her had not been so rapid as hers had been of him; at first she thought that she was going to pass him unperceived. In that case she would go a few steps farther with Mr. Lawrence, dismiss him, return, and discover herself to Cyril at her leisure. But it was not to be. Mr. Paxton, glancing about him from side to side of the pier, observed her on a sudden-and he observed Mr. Lawrence too; on which trivial accident hinges the whole of this strange history.

Miss Strong knew that she was seen. She saw that Mr. Paxton was coming to her. Her heart began to beat. In another second or two he was standing in front of her with uplifted hat, wearing a not very promising expression of countenance.

"Where's Charlie?" was his greeting.

The lady was aware that the question in itself conveyed a reproach, though she endeavoured to feign innocence.

"Charlie's at home; I couldn't induce her to come out. Her 'copy' for *Fashion* has to be ready by the morning; she says she's behind, so she stayed at home to finish it."

"Oh!"

That was all that Mr. Paxton said, but the look with which he favoured Mr. Lawrence conveyed a very vivid note of interrogation.

"Cyril," explained Miss Strong, "this is Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Lawrence, this is Mr. Paxton; and I am afraid you must excuse me."

Mr. Lawrence did excuse her. She and Mr Paxton returned together up the pier; he, directly Mr. Lawrence was out of hearing, putting to her the question which, though she dreaded, she knew was inevitable.

"Who's that?"

"That is Mr. Lawrence."

"Yes, you told me so much already; who is Mr. Lawrence?"

As she walked Miss Strong, looking down, tapped with the ferrule of her umbrella on the boards.

"Oh! he's a sort of acquaintance."

"You have not been long in Brighton, then, without making acquaintance?"

"Cyril! I have been here more than a month. Surely a girl can make an acquaintance in that time?"

"It depends, I fancy, on the girl, and on the circumstances in which she is placed. What is Mr. Lawrence?"

"I have not the faintest notion. I have a sort of general idea that, like yourself, he is something in the City. It seems to me that nowadays most men are."

"Who introduced him?"

"A shower of rain."

"An excellent guarantor of the man's eligibility, though, even for the average girl, one would scarcely have supposed that that would have been a sufficient introduction."

Miss Strong flushed.

"You have no right to talk to me like that. I did not know that you were coming to Brighton, or I would have met you at the station."

"I knew that I should meet you on the pier."

The lady stood still.

"What do you mean by that?"

The gentleman, confronting her, returned her glance for glance.

"I mean what I say. I knew that I should meet you on the pier-and I have."

The lady walked on again; whatever she might think of Mr. Paxton's inference, his actual statement was undeniable.

"You don't seem in the best of tempera, Cyril. How is Mr. Franklyn?"

"He was all right when I saw him last-a good deal better than I was or than I am."

"What is the matter with you? Are you ill?"

"Matter!" Mr. Paxton's tone was bitter. "What is likely to be the matter with the man who, after having had the luck which I have been having lately, to crown it all finds the woman he loves philandering with a stranger-the acquaintance of a shower of rain-on Brighton pier."

"You have no right to speak to me like that-not the slightest! I am perfectly free to do as I please, as you are. And, without condescending to dispute your inferences-though, as you very well know, they are quite unjust! – any attempt at criticism on your part will be resented by me in a manner which you may find unpleasant."

A pause followed the lady's words, which the gentleman did not seem altogether to relish.

"Still the fact remains that I do love you better than anything else in the world."

"Surely if that were so, Cyril, at this time of day you and I would not be situated as we are."

"By which you mean?"

"If you felt for me what you are always protesting that you feel, surely sometimes you would have done as I wished."

"Which being interpreted is equivalent to saying that I should have put my money into Goschens, and entered an office at a salary of a pound a week."

"If you had done so you would at any rate still have your money, and also, possibly, the prospect of a career."

They had reached the end of the pier, and were leaning over the side, looking towards the Worthing lights. Miss Strong's words were followed by an interval of silence. When the gentleman spoke again, in his voice there was the suspicion of a tremor.

"Daisy, don't be hard on me."

"I don't wish to be hard. It was you who began by being hard on me."

He seemed to pay no heed to her speech, continuing on a line of his own-

"Especially just now!"

She glanced at him.

"Why especially just now?"

"Well-" He stopped. The tremor in his voice became more pronounced. "Because I'm going for the gloves."

If the light had been clearer he might have seen that her face assumed a sudden tinge of pallor.

"What do you mean by you're going for the gloves?"

"I mean that probably by this time tomorrow I shall have either won you or lost you for ever."

"Cyril!" There was a catching in her breath. "I hope you are going to do nothing-wild."

"It depends upon the point of view." He turned to her with sudden passion. "I'm sick of things as they are-sick to death! I've made up my mind to know either the best or the worst."

"How do you propose to arrive at that state of knowledge?"

"I've gone a bull on Eries-a big bull. So big a bull that if they fall one I'm done."

"How done?"

"I shall be done, because it will be for reasons, good, strong, solid reasons, the last deal I shall ever make on the London Stock Exchange."

There was silence. Then she spoke again-

"You will lose. You always do lose!"

"Thanks."

"It will be almost better for you that you should lose. I am beginning to believe, Cyril, that you never will do any good till you have touched bottom, till you have lost all that you possibly can lose."

"Thank you, again."

She drew herself up, drawing herself away from the railing against which she had been leaning. She gave a gesture which was suggestive of weariness.

"I too am tired. This uncertainty is more than I can stand; you are so unstable, Cyril. Your ideas and mine on some points are wide apart. It seems to me that if a girl is worth winning, she is worth working for. As a profession for a man, I don't think that what you call 'punting' on the Stock Exchange is much better than pitch-and-toss."

"Well?"

The word was an interrogation. She had paused.

"It appears to me that the girl who marries a man who does nothing else but 'punt' is preparing for herself a long line of disappointments. Think how many times you have disappointed me. Think of the fortunes you were to have made. Think, Cyril, of the Trumpit Gold Mine-what great things were to come of that!"

"I am quite aware that I did invest every penny I could beg, borrow, or steal in the Trumpit Gold Mine, and that at present I am the fortunate possessor of a trunkful of shares which are not worth a shilling a-piece. The reminder is a pleasant one. Proceed-you seem wound up to go."

Her voice assumed a new touch of sharpness.

"The long and the short of it is, Cyril-it is better that we should understand each other! – if your present speculation turns out as disastrously as all your others have done, and it leaves you worse off than ever, the relations, such as they are, which exist between us must cease. We must be as strangers!"

"Which means that you don't care for me the value of a brass-headed pin."

"It means nothing of the kind, as you are well aware. It simply means that I decline to link my life with a man who appears incapable of keeping his own head above water. Because he insists on drowning himself, why should I allow him to drown me too?"

"I observe that you take the commercial, up-to-date view of marriage."

"What view do you take? Are you nearer to being able to marry me than ever you were? Are you not farther off? You have no regular income-and how many entanglements? What do you propose that we should live on-on the hundred and twenty pounds a year which mother left me?"

There came a considerable silence. He had not moved from the position he had taken up against the railing, and still looked across the waveless sea towards the glimmering lights of Worthing. When he did speak his tones were cold, and clear, and measured-perhaps the coldness was assumed to hide a warmer something underneath.

"Your methods are a little rough, but perhaps they are none the worse on that account. As you say so shall it be. Win or lose, to-morrow evening I will meet you again upon the pier-that is, if you will come."

"You know I'll come!"

"If I lose it will be to say goodbye. Next week I emigrate."

She was still, so he went on-

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll see you to the end of the pier, and say goodbye until tomorrow. I'll get something to eat and hurry back to town."

"Won't you come and see Charlie?"

"Thank you, I don't think I will. Miss Wentworth has not a sufficiently good opinion of me to care if I do or don't. Make her my excuses."

Another pause. Then she said, in a tone which was hardly above a whisper-

"Cyril, I do hope you'll win."

He stood, and turned, and faced her.

"Do you really mean that, Daisy?"

"You know that I do."

"Then, if you really hope that I shall win-the double event! – as an earnest of your hopes-there is no one looking! – kiss me."

She did as he bade her.

CHAPTER II
OVERHEARD IN THE TRAIN

It was with a feeling of grim amusement that Mr. Paxton bought himself a first-class ticket. It was, probably, the last occasion on which he would ride first-class for some considerable time to come. The die had fallen; the game was lost-Eries had dropped more than one. Not only had he lost all he had to lose, he was a defaulter. It was out of his power to settle, he was going to emigrate instead. He had with him a Gladstone bag; it contained all his worldly possessions that he proposed to take with him on his travels. His intention was, having told Miss Strong the news, and having bidden a last farewell, to go straight from Brighton to Southampton, and thence, by the American line, to the continent on whose shores Europe dumps so many of its failures.

The train was later than are the trains which are popular with City men. It seemed almost empty at London Bridge. Mr. Paxton had a compartment to himself. He had an evening paper with him. He turned to the money article. Eries had closed a point lower even than he had supposed. It did not matter. A point lower, more or less, would make no difference to him-the difference would be to the brokers who had trusted him. Wishing to do anything but think, he looked to see what other news the paper might contain. Some sensational headlines caught his eye.

"ROBBERY OF THE DUCHESS OF DATCHET'S DIAMONDS!

"AN EXTRAORDINARY TALE."

The announcement amused him.

"After all that is the sort of line which I ought to have made my own-robbing pure and simple. It's more profitable than what Daisy says that I call 'punting.'"

He read on. The tale was told in the usual sensational style, though the telling could scarcely have been more sensational than the tale which was told. That afternoon, it appeared, an amazing robbery had taken place-amazing, first, because of the almost incredible value of what had been stolen; and, second, because of the daring fashion in which the deed had been done. In spite of the desperate nature of his own position-or, perhaps, because of it-Mr. Paxton drank in the story with avidity.

The Duchess of Datchet, the young, and, if report was true, the beautiful wife of one of England's greatest and richest noblemen, had been on a visit to the Queen at Windsor-the honoured guest of the Sovereign. As a fitting mark of the occasion, and in order to appear before Her Majesty in the splendours which so well became her, the Duchess had taken with her the famous Datchet diamonds. As all the world knows the Dukes of Datchet have been collectors of diamonds during, at any rate, the last two centuries.

The value of their collection is fabulous-the intrinsic value of the stones which the duchess had taken with her on that memorable journey, according to the paper, was at least £250,000-a quarter of a million of money! This was the net value-indeed, it seemed that one might almost say it was the trade value, and was quite apart from any adventitious value which they might possess, from, for instance, the point of view of historical association.

Mr. Paxton drew a long breath as he read:

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds-a quarter of a million! I am not at all sure that I should not have liked to have had a finger in such a pie as that. It would be better than punting at Eries."

The diamonds, it seemed, arrived all right at Windsor, and the duchess too. The visit passed off with due *éclat*. It was as Her Grace was returning that the deed was done, though how it was done was, as yet, a profound mystery.

"Of course," commented Mr. Paxton to himself, "all criminal London knew what she had taken with her. The betting is that they never lost sight of those diamonds from first to last; to adequately safeguard them she ought to have taken with her a regiment of soldiers."

Although she had not gone so far as a regiment of soldiers, that precaution had been taken-and precautions, moreover, which had been found to be adequate, over and over again, on previous occasions-was sufficiently plain. The duchess had travelled in a reserved saloon carriage by the five minutes past four train from Windsor to Paddington. She had been accompanied by two servants, her maid, and a man-servant named Stephen Eversleigh. Eversleigh was one of a family of servants the members of which had been in the employment of the Dukes of Datchet for generations.

It was he who was in charge of the diamonds. They were in a leather despatch-box. The duchess placed them in it with her own hand, locked the box, and retained the key in her own possession. Eversleigh carried the box from the duchess's apartment in the Castle to the carriage which conveyed her to the railway station. He placed it on the seat in front of her.

He himself sat outside with the maid. When the carriage reached the station he carried it to the duchess's saloon. The duchess was the sole occupant of the saloon. She travelled with the despatch-box in front of her all the way to London. The duke met her at Paddington. Eversleigh again placed the box on the front seat of the carriage, the duke and duchess, sitting side by side, having it in full view as the brougham passed through the London streets. The diamonds, when not in actual use, were always kept, for safe custody, at Bartlett's Bank. The confidential agent of the bank was awaiting their arrival when the brougham reached the ducal mansion in Grosvenor Square. The despatch-box was taken straight to him, and, more for form's sake than anything else, was opened by the duchess in his presence, so that he might see that it really did contain the diamonds before he gave the usual receipt.

It was as well for the bank's sake that on that occasion the form was observed. When the box was opened, it was empty! There was nothing of any sort to show that the diamonds had ever been in it-they had vanished into air!

When he had reached this point Mr. Paxton put the paper down. He laughed.

"That's a teaser. The position seems to promise a pleasing problem for one of those masters of the art of detection who have been cutting such antics lately in popular fiction. If I were appointed to ferret out the mystery, I fancy that I should begin by wanting to know a few things about her Grace the Duchess. I wonder what happened to that despatch-box while she and it were *tête-à-tête?* It is to be hoped that she possesses her husband's entire confidence, otherwise it is just possible that she is in for a rare old time of it."

The newspaper had little more to tell. There were the usual attempts to fill a column with a paragraph; the stereotyped statements about the clues which the police were supposed to be following up, but all that they amounted to was this: that the duchess asserted that she had placed the diamonds in the despatch-box at Windsor Castle, and that, as a matter of plain fact, they were not in it when the box reached Grosvenor Square.

Mr. Paxton leaned back in his seat, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and mused.

"What lucky beggars those thieves must be! What wouldn't any one do for a quarter of a million-what wouldn't I? Even supposing that the value of the stones is over-stated, and that they are only worth half as much, there is some spending in £125,000. It would set me up for life, with a little over. What prospect is there in front of me-don't I know that there is none? Existence in a country which I have not the faintest desire to go to; a life which I hate; a continual struggling and striving for the barest daily bread, with, in all human probability, failure, and a nameless grave at the end. What use is there in living out such a life as that? But if I could only lay my hands on even an appreciable

fraction of that quarter of a million, with Daisy at my side-God bless the girl! how ill I have treated her! – how different it all would be!"

Mr. Paxton was possessed by a feeling of restlessness; his thoughts pricked him in his most secret places. For him, the train was moving much too slowly; had it flown on the wings of the wind it could scarcely have kept pace with the whirlwind in his brain. Rising to his feet, he began to move backwards and forwards in the space between the seats-anything was better than complete inaction.

The compartment in which he was travelling was not a new one; indeed, so far was it from being a new one, that it belonged to a type which, if not actually obsolete, at any rate nowadays is rarely seen. An oblong sheet of plate-glass was let into the partition on either side, within a few inches of the roof. This sheet of plate-glass was set in a brass frame, the frame itself being swung on a pivot.

Desirous of doing anything which would enable him, even temporarily, to escape from his thoughts, Mr. Paxton gave way to his idle and, one might almost add, impertinent curiosity. He stood, first on one seat, and peered through the glass into the adjoining compartment. So far as he was able to see, from the post of vantage which he occupied, it was vacant. He swung the glass round on its pivot. He listened. There was not a sound. Satisfied-if, that is, the knowledge gave him any satisfaction! – that there was no one there, he prepared to repeat the process of espial on the other seat.

But in this case the result was different. No sooner had he brought his eyes on a level with the sheet of glass, than he dropped down off the seat again with the rapidity of a jack-in-the-box.

"By George! I've seen that man before! It would hardly do to be caught playing the part of Peeping Tom."

Conscious of so much, he was also conscious at the same time of an increase of curiosity. Among Mr. Paxton's attributes was that one which is supposed to be the peculiar perquisite of royalty-a memory for faces. If, for any cause, a face had once been brought to his notice, he never afterwards forgot it. He had seen through that sheet of glass a countenance which he had seen before, and that quite recently.

"The chances are that I sha'n't be noticed if I am careful; and if I am caught I'll make a joke of it. I'll peep again."

He peeped again. As he did so audible words all but escaped his lips.

"The deuce! it's the beggar who was last night with Daisy on the pier."

There could not be a doubt about it; in the carriage next to his sat the individual whose companionship with Miss Strong had so annoyed him. Mr. Paxton, peering warily through the further end of the glass, treated Mr. Lawrence to a prolonged critical inspection, which was not likely to be prejudiced in that gentleman's favour.

Mr. Lawrence sat facing his observer, on Mr. Paxton's right, in the corner of the carriage. That he was not alone was plain. Mr. Paxton saw that he smiled, and that his lips were moving. Unfortunately, from Mr. Paxton's point of view, it was not easy to see who was his associate; whoever it was sat just in front of him, and therefore out of Mr. Paxton's line of vision. This was the more annoying in that Mr. Lawrence took such evident interest in the conversation he was carrying on. An idea occurred to Mr. Paxton.

"The fellow doesn't seem to see me. When I turned that other thing upon its pivot it didn't make any sound. I wonder, if I were to open this affair half an inch or so, if I could hear what the fellow's saying?"

Mr. Paxton was not in a mood to be particular. On the contrary, he was in one of those moods which come to all of us, in some dark hour of our lives, when we do the things which, being done, we never cease regretting. Mr. Paxton knelt on the cushions and he opened the frame, as he had said, just half an inch, and he put his ear as close to the opening as he conveniently could, without running the risk of being seen, and he listened. At first he heard nothing for his pains. He had not got his ear just right, and the roar of the train drowned all other sounds. Slightly shifting his position Mr. Paxton suddenly found, however, that he could hear quite well.

The speakers, to make themselves audible to each other, had to shout nearly at the top of their voices, and this, secure in their privacy, they did, the result being that Mr. Paxton could hear just as well what was being said as the person who, to all intents and purposes, was seated close beside him.

The first voice he heard was Mr. Lawrence's.

It should be noted that here and there he lost a word, as probably also did the person who was actually addressed; but the general sense of the conversation he caught quite well.

"I told you I could do it. You only want patience and resolution to take advantage of your opportunities, and a big coup is as easily carried off as a small one."

Mr. Lawrence's voice ceased. The rejoinder came from a voice which struck Mr. Paxton as being a very curious one indeed. The speaker spoke not only with a strong nasal twang, but also, occasionally, with an odd idiom. The unseen listener told himself that the speaker was probably the newest thing in races-"a German-American."

"With the assistance of a friend-eh?"

Mr. Lawrence's voice again; in it more than a suggestion of scorn.

"The assistance of a friend! When it comes to the scratch, it is on himself that a man must rely. What a friend principally does is to take the lion's share of the spoil."

"Well-why not? A man will not be able to be much of a friend to another, if, first of all, he is not a friend to himself-eh?"

Mr. Lawrence appeared to make no answer-possibly he did not relish the other's reasoning. Presently the same voice came again, as if the speaker intended to be apologetic-

"Understand me, my good friend, I do not say that what you did was not clever. No, it was damn clever! – that I do say. And I always have said that there was no one in the profession who can come near you. In your line of business, or out of it, how many are there who can touch for a quarter of a million, I want to know? Now, tell me, how did you do it-is it a secret, eh?"

If Mr. Lawrence had been piqued, the other's words seemed to have appeased him.

"Not from you-the thing was as plain as walking! The bigger the thing you have to do the more simply you do it the better it will be done."

"It does not seem as though it were simple when you read it in the papers-eh? What do you think?"

"The papers be damned! Directly you gave me the office that she was going to take them with her to Windsor, I saw how I was going to get them, and who I was going to get them from."

"Who-eh?"

"Eversleigh. Stow it-the train is stopping!"

The train was stopping. It had reached a station. The voices ceased. Mr. Paxton withdrew from his listening place with his brain in a greater whirl than ever. What had the two men been talking about? What did they mean by touching for a quarter of a million, and the reference to Windsor? The name which Mr. Lawrence had just mentioned, Eversleigh-where, quite recently, had he made its acquaintance? Mr. Paxton's glance fell on the evening paper which he had thrown on the seat. He snatched it up. Something like a key to the riddle came to him in a flash!

He opened the paper with feverish hands, turning to the account of the robbery of the Duchess of Datchet's diamonds. It was as he thought; his memory had not played him false-the person who had been in charge of the gems had been a man named Stephen Eversleigh.

Mr. Paxton's hands fell nervelessly on to his knees. He stared into vacancy. What did it mean?

The train was off again. Having heard so much, Mr. Paxton felt that he must hear more. He returned to the place of listening. For some moments, while the train was drawing clear of the station, the voices continued silent-probably before exchanging further confidences they were desirous of being certain that their privacy would remain uninterrupted. When they were heard again it seemed that the conversation was being carried on exactly at the point at which Mr. Paxton had heard it cease.

The German-American was speaking.

"Eversleigh? – that is His Grace's confidential servant-eh?"

"That's the man. I studied Mr. Eversleigh by proxy, and I found out just two things about him."

"And they were-what were they?"

"One was that he was short-sighted, and the other was that he had a pair of spectacles which the duke had given him for a birthday present, and which he thought no end of."

"That wasn't much to find out-eh?"

"You think so? Then that's where you're wrong. It's perhaps just as well for you that you don't have to play first lead."

"The treasury is more in my line-eh? However, what was the use which you made of that little find of yours?"

"If it hadn't been for that little find of mine, the possibility is that the sparklers wouldn't be where they are just now. A friend of mine had a detective camera. Those spectacles were kept in something very gorgeous in cases. My friend snapped that spectacle case with his camera. I had an almost exact duplicate made of the case from the print he got-purposely not quite exact, you know, but devilish near.

"I found myself at Windsor Station just as Her Grace was about to start for town. There were a good many people in the booking-office through which you have to pass to reach the platform. As I expected, the duchess came in front, with the maid, old Eversleigh bringing up the rear. Just as Eversleigh came into the booking-office some one touched him on the shoulder, and held out that duplicate spectacle case, saying, 'I beg your pardon, sir! Have you lost your glasses?' Of old Eversleigh's fidelity I say nothing. I don't call mere straightness anything; – but he certainly wasn't up to the kind of job he had in hand-not when he was properly handled. He has been heard to say that he would sooner lose an arm than those precious spectacles-because the duke gave them to him, you know. Perhaps he would; anyhow, he lost something worth a trifle more than his arm. When he felt himself touched on the shoulder, and saw what looked like that almighty goggle-box in the stranger's hand, he got all of a flurry, jabbed his fist into the inside pocket of his coat, and to enable him to do so popped the despatch-box down on the seat beside him-as I expected that he would do. I happened to be sitting on that seat with a rug, very nicely screened too by old Eversleigh himself, and by the stranger with the goggle-box. I nipped my rug over his box, leaving another one-own brother to the duchess's-exposed. Old Eversleigh found that the stranger's goggle-box was not his-that his own was safe in his pocket! – picked up my despatch-box, and marched off with it, while I travelled with his by the South-Western line to town; and I can only hope that he was as pleased with the exchange as I was."

The German-American's voice was heard.

"As you say, in the simplicity of your method, my good friend, was its beauty. And indeed, after all, simplicity is the very essence, the very soul, of all true art-eh?"

CHAPTER III
THE DIAMONDS

Mr. Paxton heard no more-he made no serious attempt to hear. As the German-American ceased to speak the train slowed into Preston Park. At the station Mr. Paxton saw that some one else got into the next compartment, forming a third, with its previous occupants, the rest of the way to Brighton.

Mr. Paxton had heard enough. The whirlwind in his brain, instead of becoming less, had grown more. His mental confusion had become worse confounded. He seemed unable to collect his ideas. He had attained to nothing like an adequate grasp of the situation by the time the train had arrived at its journey's end. He alighted, his Gladstone in his hand, feeling in a sort of intellectual fog. He saw Mr. Lawrence-also carrying a Gladstone-get out of the next compartment. A tall, thin man, with high cheekbones, a heavy moustache, and a pronounced stoop, got out after him-evidently the German-American. Mr. Paxton allowed the pair to walk down the platform in front, keeping himself a respectful distance in the rear. They turned into the refreshment-room. He went in after them, taking up his position close beside them, with, however, no sort of definite intention in his head. Mr. Lawrence recognised him at once, showing that he also had a memory for faces. He nodded.

"Mr. Paxton, I believe."

Mr. Paxton admitted that that was his name, conscious, on a sudden, of a wild impulse to knock the fellow down for daring to accost him.

"What is your drink, Mr. Paxton?"

That was too much; Mr. Paxton was certainly not going to drink with the man. He responded curtly-

"I have ordered."

"That doesn't matter, does it? Drink up, and have another with me."

The fellow was actually pressing him to accept of his pestilent charity-that was how Mr. Paxton put it to himself. He said nothing-not because he had nothing to say, but because never before in his life had he felt so stupid, with so little control over either his senses or his tongue. He shook his head, walked out of the refreshment-room, got into a cab, and drove off to Makell's hotel.

Directly the cab had started and was out of the station yard he told himself that he had been a fool-doubly, trebly, a fool-a fool all round, from every possible point of view. He ought never to have let the scoundrels out of his sight; he ought to have spoken to the police; he ought to have done something; under the circumstances no one but an idiot would have done absolutely nothing at all. Never mind-for the moment it was too late. He would do something to repair his error later. He would tell Miss Strong the tale; she would rejoice to find a friend of her own figuring as the hero of such a narrative; it would be a warning to her against the making of chance acquaintance! He would ask her advice; it was a case in which two heads might be better than one.

Reaching the hotel, he went straight to his bedroom, still in a sort of mental haze. He had a wash-without, however, managing to wash much of the haze out of his head. He turned to unlock his Gladstone, intending to take out of it his brush and comb. There was something the matter with the key, or else with the lock-it would not open. It was a brand-new Gladstone, bought with a particular intent; Mr. Paxton was very far from being desirous that his proposed voyage to foreign parts should prematurely be generally known. Plainly, the lock was not in the best of order. Half abstractedly he fumbled with it for some seconds, before it could be induced to open, then it was opened rather by an exertion of force, than in response to the action of the key.

Having opened it, Mr. Paxton found himself a little puzzled by the arrangement of its contents. He could not at first remember just where he had put his brush and comb. He felt on the one side,

where he had a sort of dim idea that it ought to be, and then on the other. He failed to light on it on either side. He paused for a moment to consider. Then, by degrees, distinctly remembered having placed it in a particular corner. He felt for it. It was not there. He wondered where it had contrived to conceal itself. He was certain that he had placed it in the bag. It must be in it now. He began to empty the bag of all its contents.

The first thing he took out was a shirt. He threw it from him on to the bed. As it passed through the air something fell from it on to the floor-something which came rolling against his foot. He picked it up.

It was a ring.

He could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. He sat staring at the trinket in a stupor of surprise. And the more he stared the more his wonder grew. That it was a ring there could not be the slightest shadow of doubt. It was a woman's ring, a costly one-a hoop of diamonds, the stones being of unusual lustre and size.

How could such an article as that have found its way into his Gladstone bag?

He picked up another shirt, and as he did so felt that in the front there was something hard. He opened the front to see what it was. The shirt almost dropped from his hand in the shock of his amazement. Something gleamed at him from inside the linen. Taking this something out he found himself holding in his hand a magnificent tiara of diamonds.

As he knelt there, on one knee, gazing at the gaud, he would have presented a promising study for an artist possessed of a sense of humour. His mouth was open, his eyes distended to their fullest; every feature of his countenance expressed the bewilderment he felt. The presence of a ring in that brand-new bag of his was sufficiently surprising-but a tiara of diamonds! Was he the victim of some extraordinary hallucination, or the hero of a fairy tale?

He stared at the jewel, and from the jewel to the shirt, and from the shirt to the bag. Then an idea, beginning at first to glimmer on him dimly, suddenly took vivid shape, filling him with a sense of strange excitement. He doubted if the bag were his. He leant over it to examine it more closely. New brown Gladstone bags, thirty inches in length, are apt to be as like each other as peas. This was a new bag, his was a new bag-he perceived nothing in the appearance of this one to suggest that it was not his.

And yet that this was not his bag he was becoming more and more convinced. He turned to the shirt he had been holding. The contents of his bag had all been freshly purchased-obviously, this shirt had just come from the maker's too. He looked at the maker's name inside the neckband. This was not his shirt-it had been bought at a different shop; it had one buttonhole in front instead of three; it was not his size. He looked hastily at the rest of the things which were in the bag-they none of them were his. Had he had his wits about him he would have discovered that fact directly the bag was opened. Every garment seemed to have been intended to serve as cover to a piece of jewellery. He tumbled on to the bed rings, bracelets, brooches, necklets; out of vests, shirts, socks, and drawers. Till at last he stood, with an air of stupefaction, in front of a heap of glittering gems, the like of which he had scarcely thought could have existed outside a jeweller's shop.

What could be the meaning of it? By what accident approaching to the miraculous could a bag containing such a treasure trove have been exchanged for his? What eccentric and inexcusably careless individual could have been carrying about with him such a gorgeous collection in such a flimsy covering?

The key to the situation came to him as borne by a flash of lightning. They were all diamonds on the bed-nothing but diamonds. He caught up the evening paper which he had brought with him from town. He turned to the list which it contained of the diamonds which had been stolen from the Duchess of Datchet. It was as he thought. Incredible though it seemed, unless his senses played him false, in front of him were those priceless jewels-the world-famed Datchet diamonds! Reflection showed him, too, that this astounding climax had been brought about by the simplest accident. He

remembered that Mr. Lawrence had alighted from the railway carriage on to the Brighton platform with the Gladstone in his hand; – he remembered now, although it had not struck him at the time, that that bag, like his own, had been brown and new. In the refreshment-room Mr. Lawrence had put his bag down upon the floor. Mr. Paxton had put his down beside it. In leaving, he must have caught up Mr. Lawrence's bag instead of his own. He had spoiled the spoiler of his spoils. Without intending to do anything of the kind, he had played on Mr. Lawrence exactly the same trick which that enterprising gentleman had himself-if Mr. Paxton could believe what he had overheard him say in the railway carriage-played on the Duchess of Datchet.

When Mr. Paxton realised exactly how it was he sat down on the side of the bed, and he trembled. It was so like a special interposition of Providence-or was it of the devil? He stared at the scintillating stones. He took them up and began to handle them. This, according to the paper, was the Amsterdam Necklace, so called because one of the Dukes of Datchet had bought all the stones for it in Amsterdam. It, alone, was worth close in the neighbourhood of a hundred thousand pounds.

A hundred thousand pounds! Mr. Paxton's fingers tingled as he thought of it. His lips went dry. What would a hundred thousand pounds not mean to him? – and he held it, literally, in the hollow of his hand. He did not know with certainty whose it was. Providence had absolutely thrown it at his head. It might not be the Duchess's, after all. At any rate, it would be but robbing the robber.

Then there was the Datchet Tiara, the Begum's Brooch, the Banee's Bracelet; if the newspaper could be credited, every piece in the collection was historical. As he toyed with them, holding them to the light, turning them this way and that, looking at them from different points of view, how the touch of the diamonds seemed to make the blood in Mr. Paxton's veins run faster!

He began to move about the bedroom restlessly, returning every now and then to take still another look at the shimmering lumps of light which were beginning to exercise over him a stronger and stronger fascination. How beautiful they were! And how low he himself had fallen! He could scarcely sink much lower. Anyhow, it would be but to pass from one ditch to another. Supposing he obtained for them even a tithe of their stated value! At this crisis in his career, what a fresh start in life five-and-twenty thousand pounds would mean! It would mean the difference between hope and helplessness, between opportunity and despair. With his experience, on such a foundation he could easily build up a monstrous fortune-a fortune which would mean happiness-Daisy's and his own. Then the five-and-twenty thousand pounds could be easily returned. Compared with what he would make with it, it was but a trifle, after all.

And then the main point was-and Mr. Paxton told himself that on that point rested the crux of the position-it would not be the Duchess of Datchet who would be despoiled; it was the robbers who, with true poetic justice, would be deprived of their ill-gotten gains. She had lost them in any case. He-he had but found them. He endeavoured to insist upon it, to himself, that he had but found them. True, there was such a thing as the finder returning what he had found-particularly when he suspected who had been the loser. But who could expect a man situated as he was to throw away a quarter of a million of money? This was not a case which could be judged by the ordinary standards of morality-it was an unparalleled experience.

Still, he could not bring himself to say, straight out, that he would stick to what he had got, and make the most of it. His mind was not sufficiently clear to enable him to arrive at any distinct decision. But he did what was almost equally fatal, he allowed himself, half unconsciously-without venturing to put it into so many words-to drift. He would see which way the wind blew, and then, if he could, go with it. For the present he would do nothing, forgetting that, in such a position as his, the mere fact of his doing nothing involved the doing of a very great deal. He looked at his watch, starting to find it was so late.

"Daisy will be tired of waiting. I must hurry, or she'll be off before I come."

He looked into the glass. Somehow there seemed to be a sort of film before his eyes which prevented him from seeing himself quite clearly, or else the light was bad! But he saw enough of

himself to be aware that he was not looking altogether his usual self. He endeavoured to explain this in a fashion of his own.

"No wonder that I look worried after what I've gone through lately, and especially to-day-that sort of thing's enough to take the heart out of any man, and make him look old before his time." He set his teeth; something hard and savage came into his face. "But perhaps the luck has turned. I'd be a fool to throw a chance away if it has. I've gone in for some big things in my time; why shouldn't I go in for the biggest thing of all, and with one bold stroke more than win back all I've lost?"

He suffered his own question to remain unanswered; but he stowed the precious gems, higgledy-piggledy, inside the copy of the evening paper which contained the news of the robbery of the Duchess of Datchet's diamonds; the paper he put into a corner of the Gladstone bag which was not his; the bag he locked with greater care than he had opened it. When it was fastened, he stood for a moment, surveying it a little grimly.

"I'll leave it where it is. No one knows what there is inside it. It'll be safe enough. Anyhow, I'll give the common or garden thief a chance of providing for himself for life; his qualms on the moral aspect of the situation will be fewer than mine. If it's here when I come back I'll accept its continued presence as an omen."

He put on his hat, and he went out to find Miss Strong.

CHAPTER IV
MISS WENTWORTH'S RUDENESS

Miss Strong was growing a little tired of waiting. Indeed, she was beginning to wonder if Mr. Paxton was about to fail in still another something he had undertaken. She loitered near the gates of the pier, looking wistfully at every one who entered. The minutes went by, and yet "he cometh not," she said.

It was not the pleasantest of nights for idling by the sea. A faint, but chilly, breeze was in the air. There was a suspicion of mist. Miss Strong was growing more and more conscious that the night was raw and damp. To add to the discomfort of her position, just inside the gates of Brighton pier is not the most agreeable place for a woman to have to wait at night-she is likely to find the masculine prowler conspicuously in evidence. Miss Strong had moved away from at least the dozenth man who had accosted her, when she referred to her watch.

"I'll give him five minutes more, and then, if he doesn't come, I'm off."

Scarcely had she uttered the words than she saw Mr. Paxton coming through the turnstile. With a feeling of no inconsiderable relief she moved hastily forward. In another moment they were clasping hands.

"Cyril! I'm glad you've come at last! But how late you are!"

"Yes; I've been detained."

The moment he opened his mouth it struck her that about his manner there was something odd. But, as a wise woman in her generation, she made no comment. Together they went up the pier.

Now that he had come Mr. Paxton did not seem to be in a conversational mood. They had gone half-way up; still he evinced no inclination to speak. Miss Strong, however, excused him. She understood the cause of his silence-or thought she did. Her heart was heavy-on his account, and on her own. Her words, when they came, were intended to convey the completeness of her comprehension.

"I am so sorry."

He turned, as if her words had startled him.

"Sorry?"

"I know all about it, Cyril."

This time it was not merely a question of appearance. It was an obvious fact that he was startled. He stood stock still and stared at her. Stammering words came from his lips.

"You know all about it? What-what do you mean?"

She seemed to be surprised at his surprise. "My dear Cyril, you forget that there are papers."

"Papers?"

Still he stammered.

"Yes, papers-newspapers. I've had every edition, and of course I've seen how Eries have fallen.

"Eries? Fallen? Oh! – of course! – I see!"

She was puzzled to perceive that he appeared positively relieved, as though he had supposed and feared that she had meant something altogether different. He took off his hat to wipe his brow, although the night was very far from being unduly warm. He began walking again, speaking now glibly enough, with a not unnatural bitterness.

"They have fallen, sure enough-just as surely as if, if I had gone a bear, they would have risen. As you were good enough to say last night, it was exactly the sort of thing which might have been expected."

"I am so sorry, Cyril."

"What's the use of being sorry?"

His tone was rough, almost rude. But she excused him still.

"Is it very bad?"

Then a wild idea came to him-one which, at the moment, seemed to him almost to amount to inspiration. In the disordered condition of his faculties-for, temporarily, they were disordered-he felt, no doubt erroneously enough, that in the girl's tone there was something besides sympathy, that there was contempt as well-contempt for him as for a luckless, helpless creature who was an utter and entire failure. And he suddenly resolved to drop at least a hint that, while she was despising him as so complete a failure, even now there was, actually within his grasp, wealth sufficient to satisfy the dreams of avarice.

"I don't know what you call very bad; as regards the Eries it is about as bad as it could be. But-"

He hesitated and stopped.

"But what?" She caught sight of his face. She saw how it was working. "Cyril, is there any good news to counteract the bad? Have you had a stroke of luck?"

Yet he hesitated, already half regretting that he had said anything at all. But, having gone so far, he went farther.

"I don't want you to reckon on it just at present, but I think it possible that, very shortly, I may find myself in possession of a larger sum of money than either of us has dreamed of."

"Cyril! Do you mean it?"

Her tone of incredulity spurred him on.

"Should I be likely to say such a thing if I did not mean it? I mean exactly what I said. To be quite accurate, it is possible, nay, probable, that before very long I shall be the possessor of a quarter of a million of money. I hope that will be enough for you. It will for me."

"A quarter of a million! Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, Cyril!"

"It sounds a nice little sum, doesn't it? I hope that it will feel as nice when it's mine!"

"But, Cyril, I don't understand. Is it a new speculation you are entering on?"

"It is a speculation-of a kind." His tone was ironical, though she did not seem to be conscious of the fact. "A peculiar kind. Its peculiarity consists in this, that, though I may not be able to lay my hands on the entire quarter of a million, I can on an appreciable portion of it whenever I choose."

"What is the nature of the speculation? Is it on the Stock Exchange?"

"That, at present, is a secret. It is not often that I have kept a secret from you; you will have to forgive me, Daisy, if I keep one now."

Something peculiar in his tone caught her ear. She glanced at him sharply.

"You are really in earnest, Cyril? You do mean that there is a reasonable prospect of your position being improved at last?"

"There is not only a reasonable prospect, there is a practical certainty."

"In spite of what you have lost in Eries?"

"In spite of everything." A ring of passion came into his voice. "Daisy, don't ask me any more questions now. Trust me! I tell you that in any case a fortune, or something very like one, is within my grasp."

He stopped, and she was silent. They went and stood where they had been standing the night before-looking towards the Worthing lights. Each seemed to be wrapped in thought. Then she said softly, in her voice a trembling-

"Cyril, I am so glad."

"I am glad that you are glad."

"And I am so sorry for what I said last night."

"What was it you said that is the particular occasion of your sorrow?"

She drew closer to his side. When she spoke it was as if, in some strange way, she was afraid.

"I am sorry that I said that if luck went against you to-day things would have to be over between us. I don't know what made me say it. I did not mean it. I thought of it all night; I have been thinking of it all day. I don't think that, whatever happens, I could ever find it in my heart to send you away."

"I assure you, lady, that I should not go unless you sent me!"

"Cyril!" She pressed his arm. Her voice sank lower. She almost whispered in his ear, while her eyes looked towards the Worthing lights. "I think that perhaps it would be better if we were to get married as soon as we can-better for both of us."

Turning, he gripped her arms with both his hands.

"Do you mean it?"

"I do; if you do the great things of which you talk or if you don't. If you don't there is my little fortune, with which we must start afresh, both of us together, either on this side of the world or on the other, whichever you may choose."

"Daisy!" His voice vibrated with sudden passion. "Will you come with me to the other side of the world in any case?"

"What-even if you make your fortune?"

"Yes; even if I make my fortune!"

She looked at him with that something on her face which is the best thing that a man can see. And tears came into her eyes. And she said to him, in the words which have been ringing down the ages-

"Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me!"

It may be that the words savoured to him of exaggeration; at any rate, he turned away, as if something choked his utterance. She, too, was still.

"I suppose you don't want a grand wedding."

"I want a wedding, that's all I want. I don't care what sort of a wedding it is so long as it's a wedding. And" – again her voice sank, and again she drew closer to his side-"I don't want to have to wait for it too long."

"Will you be ready to marry me within a month?"

"I will."

"Then within a month we will be married."

They were silent. His thoughts, in a dazed sort of fashion, travelled to the diamonds which were in somebody else's Gladstone bag. Her thoughts wandered through Elysian fields. It is possible that she imagined-as one is apt to do-that his thoughts were there likewise.

All at once she said something which brought him back from what seemed to be a waking dream. She felt him start.

"Come with me, and let's tell Charlie."

The suggestion was not by any means to Mr. Paxton's taste. He considered for a few seconds, seeming to hesitate. She perceived that her proposition had not been received with over-much enthusiasm.

"Surely you don't mind our telling Charlie?"

"No" – his voice was a little surly-"I don't mind."

Miss Charlotte Wentworth, better known to her intimates as Charlie, was in some respects a young woman of the day. She was thirty, and she wrote for her daily bread-wrote anything, from "Fashions" to "Poetry," from "Fiction" to "Our Family Column." She had won for herself a position of tolerable comfort, earning something over five-hundred a year with satisfactory regularity. To state that is equivalent to saying that, on her own lines, she was a woman of the world, a citizen of the New Bohemia, capable of holding something more than her own in most circumstances in which she might find herself placed, with most, if not all, of the sentiment which is supposed to be a feminine attribute knocked out of her. She was not bad-looking; dressed well, with a suggestion of masculinity; wore pince-nez, and did whatsoever it pleased her to do. Differing though they did from each other in so many respects, she and Daisy Strong had been the friends of years. When Mrs. Strong had died, and

Daisy was left alone, Miss Wentworth had insisted on their setting up together, at least temporarily, a joint establishment, an arrangement from which there could be no sort of doubt that Miss Strong received pecuniary advantage. Mr. Paxton was not Miss Wentworth's lover-nor, to be frank, was she his; the consequence of which was that her brusque, outspoken method of speech conveyed to his senses-whether she intended it or not-a suggestion of scorn, being wont to touch him on just those places where he found himself least capable of resistance.

When the lovers entered, Miss Wentworth, with her person on one chair and her feet on another, was engaged in reading a magazine which had just come in. Miss Strong, desiring to avoid the preliminary skirmishing which experience had taught her was apt to take place whenever her friend and her lover met, plunged at once into the heart of the subject which was uppermost in her mind.

"I've brought you some good news-at least I think it is good news."

Miss Wentworth looked at her-a cross-examining sort of look-then at Mr. Paxton, then back at the lady.

"Good news? One always does associate good news with Mr. Paxton. The premonition becomes a kind of habit."

The gentleman thus alluded to winced. Miss Strong did not appear to altogether relish the lady's words. She burst out with the news of which she spoke, as if with the intention of preventing a retort coming from Mr. Paxton.

"We are going to be married."

Miss Wentworth displayed a possibly intentional mental opacity.

"Who is going to be married?"

"Charlie! How aggravating you are! Cyril and I, of course."

Miss Wentworth resumed her reading.

"Indeed! Well, it's no affair of mine. Of course, therefore, I should not presume to make any remark. If, however, any one should invite me to comment on the subject, I trust that I shall be at the same time informed as to what is the nature of the comment which I am invited to make."

Miss Strong went and knelt at Miss Wentworth's side, resting her elbows on that lady's knees.

"Charlie, won't you give us your congratulations?"

Miss Wentworth replied, without removing her glance from off the open page of her magazine-

"With pleasure-if you want them. Also, if you want it, I will give you eighteenpence-or even half a crown."

"Charlie! How unkind you are!"

Miss Wentworth lowered her magazine. She looked Miss Strong straight in the face. Tears were in the young lady's eyes, but Miss Wentworth showed not the slightest sign of being moved by them.

"Unfortunately, as it would seem, though I am a woman, I do occasionally allow my conduct to be regulated by the dictates of common sense. When I see another woman making a dash towards suicide I don't, as a rule, give her a helping push, merely because she happens to be my friend; preferentially, if I can, I hold her back, even though it be against her will. I have yet to learn in what respect Mr. Paxton-who, I gladly admit, is personally a most charming gentleman-is qualified to marry even a kitchen-maid. Permit me to finish. You told me last night that Mr. Paxton was going a bull on Eries; that if they fell one he would be ruined. In the course of the day they have fallen more than one; therefore, if what you told me was correct, he must be ruined pretty badly. Then, without any sort of warning, you come and inform me that you intend to marry the man who is doubly and trebly ruined, and you expect me to offer my congratulations on the event offhand! On the evidence which is at present before the court it can't be done."

"Why shouldn't I marry him, even if he is ruined?"

"Why, indeed? I am a supporter of the liberty of the female subject, if ever there was one. Why, if you wished to, shouldn't you marry a crossing-sweep? I don't know. But, on the other hand, I don't see on what grounds you could expect me to offer you my congratulations if you did."

"Cyril is not a crossing-sweep."

"No; he has not even that trade at his finger-ends."

"Charlie!" Mr. Paxton made as if to speak. Miss Strong motioned him to silence with a movement of her hand. "As it happens, you are quite wrong. It is true that Cyril lost by Eries, but he has more than made up for that loss by what he has gained in another direction. Instead of being ruined, he has made a fortune."

"Indeed! Pray, how did he manage to do that? I always did think that Mr. Paxton was a remarkable man. My confidence in him is beginning to be more than justified. And may I, at the same time, ask what is Mr. Paxton's notion of a fortune?"

"Tell her, Cyril, all about it."

Thus suffered at last to deliver his soul in words, Mr. Paxton evinced a degree of resentment which, perhaps, on the whole, was not unjustified.

"I fail to see that there is any necessity for me to justify myself in Miss Wentworth's eyes, who, on more than one occasion, has shown an amount of interest in my affairs which was only not impertinent because it happened to be feminine. But since, Daisy, you appear to be anxious that Miss Wentworth should be as satisfied on the subject of my prospects and position as you yourself are, I will do the best I can. And therefore Miss Wentworth, I would explain that my notion of a fortune is a sum equivalent to some ten or twenty times the amount you yourself are likely to be able to earn in the whole of your life."

"That ought to figure up nicely. And do you really mean to say, Mr. Paxton, that you have lost one fortune and gained another in the course of a single day?"

"I do."

"How was it done? I wish you would put me in the way of doing it for myself."

"Surely, Miss Wentworth, a woman of your capacity is qualified to do anything she pleases without prompting, and solely on her own initiative!"

"Thanks, Mr. Paxton, it's very kind of you to say such pretty things, but I am afraid you estimate my capacity a thought too highly." Miss Wentworth turned in her seat, so as to have the gentleman within her range of vision. "You understand, Mr. Paxton, very well how it is. Daisy is a lonely child. She belongs to the order of women who were in fashion before the commercial instinct became ingrained in the feminine constitution. She wants looking after. There are only Mr. Franklyn and myself to look after her. Satisfy me that, after all liabilities are settled, there is a substantial balance on the right side of your account, and I will congratulate you both."

"That, at the moment, I cannot do. But I will do this. I will undertake, in less than a fortnight, to prove myself the possessor of possibly something like a quarter of a million, and certainly of a hundred thousand pounds."

"A quarter of a million! A hundred thousand pounds! Such figures warm one's blood. One will almost begin to wonder, Mr. Paxton, if you can have come by them honestly."

The words were uttered lightly. Mr. Paxton chose to take them as if they had been meant in earnest. His cheeks flushed. His eyes flamed fire. He stood up, so beside himself with rage that it was a second or two before he could regain sufficient self-control to enable him to speak.

"Miss Wentworth, how dare you say such a thing! I have endured more from you than any man ought to endure from any woman. But when you charge me with dishonesty it is too much, even from you to me. You take advantage of your sex to address to me language for which, were the speaker a man, I would thrash him within an inch of his life."

Miss Strong, with white face, looked from one to the other.

"Cyril, she didn't mean what you think. Tell him, Charlie, that you didn't mean what he thinks."

Through her glasses Miss Wentworth surveyed the angry man with shrewd, unfaltering eyes.

"Really, Mr. Paxton puts me in a difficult position. He is so quick to take offence where none was intended, that one hardly knows what to think. Surely, when a man shows such heat and such

violence in resenting what only a distorted imagination could twist into an actual imputation of dishonesty, it suggests that his own conscience can scarcely be quite clear."

Mr. Paxton seemed struggling as if to speak, and then to put a bridle on his tongue. The truth is, that he was only too conscious that he was in no mood to be a match in argument-or, for the matter of that, in retort either-for this clear-sighted lady. He felt that, if he was not careful, he would go too far; that he had better take himself away before he had made a greater exhibition of himself than he had already. So he contented himself with what was meant as an assumption of dignity.

"That is enough. Between you and me nothing more need, or can, be said. I have the honour, Miss Wentworth, of wishing you goodnight."

She showed no symptoms of being crushed. On the contrary, she retained her coolness, and also her powers of exasperation.

"Good-night, Mr. Paxton. Shall I ring the bell, Daisy, or will you show Mr. Paxton to the door?"

Miss Strong darted at her a look which, on that occasion at any rate, was not a look of love, and followed Mr. Paxton, who already had vanished from the room. Finding him in the hall, she nestled up to his side.

"I am sorry, Cyril, that this should have happened. If I had had the least suspicion of anything of the kind, I never would have asked you to come."

Mr. Paxton wore, or attempted to wear, an air of masculine superiority.

"My dear Daisy, I have seldom met Miss Wentworth without her having insulted me. On this occasion, however, she has gone too far. I will never, willingly, darken her door again. I hope you will not ask me; but if you do I shall be compelled to decline."

"It's my door as well as hers. But it won't be for long. Still, I don't think she meant what you thought she did-she couldn't be so absurd! It's a way she has of talking; she often says things without considering the construction of which they are capable."

"It is only the fact of her being a woman, my dear Daisy, which gives her the impunity of which she takes undue advantage."

"Cyril, you mustn't brand all women because of one. We are not all like that. Do you suppose that I am not aware that the person, be it man or woman, who imagines you to be capable of dishonesty either does not know you, or else is stark, raving mad? Do you think that I could love you without the absolute certainty of knowing you to be a man of blameless honour? I don't suppose you are an angel-I'm not one either, though perhaps you mightn't think it, sir! And I take it for granted that you have done plenty of things which you would rather have left undone-as I have too! But I do know that, regarded from the point of view of any standard, whether human or Divine, in all essentials you are an honest man, and that you could be nothing else."

The eulogium was a warm one-it made Mr. Paxton feel a trifle queer.

"Thank you, darling,"

So he murmured, and he kissed her.

"You will meet me again to-morrow night to tell me how the fortune fares?"

He tried to avoid doing so; but the effort only failed-he had to wince. He could only hope that she did not notice it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.