

A Great Jewel Robbery

There is a strange and too often a fearful history attached to every great gem of price, many of which, while flashing on the brow of beauty, or in some regal or imperial ornament, are dimmed to the thoughtful mind by the tears shed over them, or by the blood in which they have too often been bathed. Robbery and murder have ever been mingled with the stories of precious gems; and as a peaceful man, living in these highly civilized times, I have more than once felt my life to be far from safe as soon as it was known that in the little black leathern case I carried, or even in the scrap of tissue-paper in my waistcoat pocket, I held so many valuable diamonds, rubies, or sapphires.

One gets used to it in time; but at first there is a strong feeling that every person who looks at you, or says a word about the weather, is bent upon murder and robbery. You live a solitary life during your travels. You get in the farthest corners of carriages. You would not ride alone in a first coupe with some strange traveler, upon any consideration, even if that strange traveler were a feeble old woman, since you would certainly suppose her to be a ruffian in disguise. Elegantly dressed ladies become swindlers' accomplices; clerical gentlemen, the swindlers themselves; and distrust of everybody and everything becomes the bane of your existence. Your wine or tea seems to be drugged, your food poisoned; and once, at a hotel where I was staying, I had serious thoughts about giving the proprietor into custody for supplying me with medicated soap.

I will not mention the name of the Bond Street firm with which I was some years ago connected, but let it suffice that their name was well known, and that the manufacture of more than one regal diadem had been intrusted to their skilled workmen. I was with them some twelve or fourteen years, and it was during that period that the incident I am about to relate occurred. As a matter of course, the strictest injunctions respecting care, caution, and watchfulness are issued to all the [employees], especially to those whose daily business brings them into contact with the public: and being always in the show-rooms myself, I was one of those in whom the elders of the firm placed confidence. The consequence was, that being tolerably thoughtful, sharp of eye, and a good judge of gems, I rose to occupy one of the most responsible positions, and to me were always intrusted those rather delicate, critical, and caution-demanding embassies, where customers wished for jewels to be sent to their houses for inspection.

In course of time, a little feeling of jealousy sprang up; but it did not trouble me, for, either from extra care, or from good fortune, I had not in any single case been the cause of loss to my employers—a state of satisfaction hardly to be enjoyed by either of my brother assistants, so many, so ingenious, and so carefully contrived were, in those days, the plans for defrauding the great jewelers. I do not know that any very great improvement has taken place of late years; but my experience is with the past, and I relate accordingly. In fact, so many were the tricks, that when a visitor came to the show-rooms, the first question we had to ask was: “Is this a lady or a sharper?”

Very often the swindlers, or thieves, were easy to detect; for though dressed in the extreme of fashion, and arriving perhaps in a brougham, there would be some slip of the tongue—some

vulgarism—which would betray them. Frequently, a misplaced *h*, or a wrongly applied verb, has raised suspicions which defeated a carefully planned swindle, and sent the disappointed ones to lament their ill success, or often to jail. But with all care, the jewelers' enemies are so many, and their losses so heavy, that, in spite of enormous profits, the balance-sheets at the end of the year are not so satisfactory as is supposed for those who follow this artistic business. Now a well-dressed couple would come and look at some rings, turn them over for half an hour, and then leave, declaring that there was nothing to suit; when perhaps before, more often after their departure, one or two valuable gems have been missed—taken no one could tell how. Twice over, assistants allowed jewels to be taken into the next room, at some hotel, to show a sick lady, and came back ruefully to announce the sick, as well as the sound, lady had disappeared. Times out of number, ring, chain, or bracelet has been snatched from counter or table; once such a thing happened when I was in waiting, but a presented pistol stopped the marauder before he reached the door—a door already bolted by the porter; and my friend was committed for trial, and afterwards transported. One select company of visitors purchased goods to the amount of nine hundred pounds, when the gentleman of the party wrote a check on the spot for the amount—Drummonds of Charing Cross being his bankers—but as I objected to the jewels being taken away until the check was honored, I was courteously told to send them to Morley's Hotel, and half sorry to be compelled to show the distrust, I bowed the distinguished customers out.

“Here, Johnson,” I said to one of our men, “run down at once to Drummonds, and present this check; take a cab.”

In half an hour Johnson was back with the check branded with the words, “No effects.”

I received an invitation to dine with the head of our firm after that, and returned home at night wearing a very handsome gold watch. “A reward for your shrewdness,” said the old gentleman, clapping me on the shoulder. “You'll be in the firm yet, Willis, that you will.”

“I hope I may,” I thought as I went home that night; but the happy consummation never arrived, since I was but mortal, and like other men, liable to be deceived; though upon maturer consideration, I don't think I was very well used.

I was seated one day, busily examining some stones which were to be reset for the Countess of Maraschino, when the principal came softly in.

“Lock those up, Willis,” he said, “and go and attend to those parties in the front show-room. Thomas is with them, and I don't half like their looks.”

I hurried into the show-room to relieve Mr. Thomas of his task, which he gave up with a very bad grace, and proceeded to listen to the demands of a tall lady and gentleman in black, both of whom wore respirators, and spoke in low, husky voices. The gentleman looked very pale and ill, and the lady was very closely veiled as to the upper part of her face; but upon my approach she threw up her fall, and displayed the bright bold eyes of a very handsome woman.

“Don't look suspicious,” I thought, as I evaded the glance directed at me; for our rule is not to look at eyes, but hands,—or rather fingers, which some times turn out to be light. In this case,

though, the lady's were *bien gantee*, and the gentleman's thin, white, and soft,—an invalid's hands, in fact, and I proceeded to listen to their demands.

“Well, Lilla, what's it to be?” said the gentleman.

“I thought you had decided, love,” was the reply. “Something simple, and not too expensive now, whatever we may decide upon hereafter. Why not keep to what you said, —a bracelet, or a cross?”

“Well, show me some bracelets,” the gentleman said. “We do not want anything of high price, but something pretty, light, and suited for a young lady of eighteen, about to be married.”

I proceeded to open case after case of bracelets of all prices, from ten to five hundred guineas each; but though they were fastidious and hard to please, I was bound to confess that the lady's taste was excellent, and that the gentleman was no mean connoisseur in gems.

“I rather like that,” said the gentleman at last, selecting a very pretty but slight bracelet, set with a sapphire, surrounded by pearls. “What is the price?”

“That is sixty guineas,” I said.

“Yes, it's pretty enough,” said the lady: “but not sufficiently good.”

“You mean not valuable enough,” said the gentleman: “but you know the old proverb about the gift-horse. Lucille will not study the value, depend upon it; and, besides, I don't see anything I like half so well.”

“Have it then, dear,” was the reply; and then, directly after, “Ah, what a sweet cross!” exclaimed the lady, looking at an enamel and gold ornament lying in a case, —and which I immediately opened, for I must confess I had almost forgotten our principal's suspicions.

“It *is* a sweet little thing!” exclaimed the lady, examining the cross, “such a fine pearl, too, in the centre. I should like it.”

“What, to give to Lucille?” said the gentleman, smiling.

“No; of course not. I fancied it myself.”

“My dear Lilla, this is not a linen draper's shop,” said the gentleman with a shrug, and then there was a smile and a whisper between them.

“What is the price of the cross?” said the gentleman at last.

“Fifty guineas,” I said.

“It seems a good deal for so small an ornament,” said the gentleman, turning and re-turning the cross; but I explained that the size of the pearls increased its value; and after a little hesitation, he decided to take it, when I saw he was rewarded by a quiet pressure of the hand from his companion, whose eyes then met mine almost mirthfully for a moment.

“You’re a nice creature, I expect,” muttered I to myself; “coax him out of everything you fancy, and then laugh in your sleeve.” But my eyes were wanted to guard the valuable assortment of jewelry displayed, and they were back the next instant to business.

“Where can I send these, sir?” I inquired.

“Ah! we’ll take them,” said the lady; “we will not trouble you to send.”

I explained that it would be no trouble, but they held to their determination; and upon payment being requested, the gentleman drew out a check-book, asked for pen and ink, and wrote a check for one hundred and ten guineas upon a small city bank.

Now it was that my lips became a little tighter, and I felt that the principal had had some cause for his suspicions; and thoroughly on my guard, I took the check, and explained that it was a rule of the establishment that goods should not be delivered until after a check had been presented.

“Ah, quite right, quite right,” said the gentleman quietly, and without displaying the slightest annoyance. “I can easily suppose that you are obliged to be careful.”

But the lady looked angry, and returned my bow very distantly as I ushered them out, having promised to send the purchases to the fashionable hotel—Moore’s, in Brook street—at which they were staying.

“All a farce, but well carried out,” I said to the principal as he came up to me, and I showed him the check and the card given me, bearing the name “Mr. H. Elliston Ross,” and in pencil, “Moore’s Hotel.” “But we’ll send the check all the same. Here, Johnson.”

The principal shrugged his shoulders; and as Johnson came up to where I was carefully running over the various items of jewelry, to see that nothing had been stolen, I gave him the check, and he went cityward.

To my great satisfaction, all was right; not a jewel missing, and the purchased cases lying by me. Suddenly a cold chill shot through me. Had they contrived to abstract the contents? I tore the little morocco boxes open; but no—all was correct. Cross and bracelet lay upon their white velvet beds; and so far, everything was perfectly satisfactory. If they were swindlers, we had escaped; and I began to wonder whether I should get another invitation to dinner, a chain for my watch, and be told that I was a step nearer to the junior partnership.

To our intense astonishment, though, at an hour’s end, Johnson returned smiling.

“All right, sir,” he said.

“Why, you don’t mean—”

“All right, sir,” he said. “Check cashed in an instant: hundred and fifteen pounds, ten shillings.”

It is almost needless to add that the two little cases were sent immediately to the hotel, and a discussion followed respecting unnecessary suspicion, and how very often it happened that swindlers passed unnoticed, while honest people were suspected.

A month passed when one cold January day I was in the show-room, and the same lady made her appearance alone. She still wore her respirator, but looked very pale, haggard, and troubled. The bold look seemed to have gone from her eyes; and as I recalled my thoughts, I felt that I had misjudged her, for she began to speak tenderly of her husband, Mr. Ross, who was lying very ill at the hotel.

“I have brought back the cross to be repaired,” she said, drawing the little morocco case from her rich sable muff. “The ring was too slight, and it broke from my necklet the second time it was worn. I had a narrow escape of losing it; but Mr. Ross found it himself upon the lawn, trodden into the grass. I thought I would leave it until we came up again. Of course, you can repair it?”

I expressed my sorrow, and promised to have it seen to at once.

“You need not hurry for a few days. Mr. Ross is in town to consult Sir Ealing Dean, and I fear he will send us to Madeira. This climate is killing my poor husband”

The distant hauteur was all gone; and in a lady-like, courteous manner, our customer bowed to my few sympathetic remarks, and hints of its being an unusually trying season, &c.

“Our friend was delighted with the little bracelet, a gift which Mr. Ross wishes to supplement with something a little more valuable. Perhaps I could be allowed to select a few things for you to submit to his choice at the hotel? I know his taste now pretty well, and it will save trouble.”

“Anything you like to select shall be sent, ma’am,” I said; and then I proceeded to open and display to their best advantage some very valuable bracelets, which were one and all rejected.

“Yes,” she said sadly, “they are very handsome; but Mr. Ross would not like them, I am sure, and it is useless to take things on that he would not approve. His taste was always good; and as his health fails, it seems to have acquired an indescribable tone that I cannot explain, except that it is artistic and dreamy.”

I brought out some plain but good pearl and diamond ornaments in suites, one suite in particular taking her attention.

“Yes; I like that. You might send that.”

“It is a suite made to order; but it could be made again in a very short time,” I said.

“That would not do,” she said, “unless it could be supplied in a fortnight.”

“I think we could get over that difficulty,” I said with a smile; and then bracelets, rings, chains, and watches—certainly the most chaste and elegant we had—were selected and put aside.

“It is only fair to say,” said the lady, smiling—at least I could see that she was smiling, in spite of her respirator,—“that Mr. Ross will not purchase many of these ornaments. I know he would like a watch and chain and a ring. Perhaps, too, if he admired them, one of those pearl suites; but I thought it better to speak, as since his illness has become, not irritable but—but—perhaps a little hard to please, and I should be sorry if he rejected everything you brought.”

So much delicacy was displayed in these remarks, that I could only courteously assure her that we should only be too happy to attend again and again upon Mr. Ross, till we had hit upon something he admired; and upon promising to send the selected goods on the next morning at eleven, our visitor rose to go.

“I would ask you to send this afternoon,” said the lady on rising, “but I don’t think Mr. Ross quite well enough. He saw our physician this morning, and the interviews are always very trying to his nerves.”

I placed the little cross in the workman’s hands for repair; and the next morning, punctually at eleven, I was at Moore’s Hotel, accompanied by a porter and a goodly assortment of jewelry.

A few words with the manager set me quite at ease, though my inquiries were a matter of form. Mr. Elliston Ross lived in Yorkshire, owned coal mines and was in town to visit the court physician, Sir Ealing Dean; had been there once before for the same reason; perfect gentleman; his lady quite an angel,—waited on him night and day.

I was shown to their room, where Mrs. Ross was seated,—this time without her respirator. She rose with a sad smile, and motioned me to a seat; while putting on her respirator, she went into the next room, remaining absent a few minutes, and then returning requested me to bring in my cases for Mr. Ross to see.

I had left the porter down-stairs; so, taking up the two small leathern boxes, I followed Mrs. Ross into a slightly shaded room, where, looking deathly pale, the gentleman who had visited our place of business lay upon a couch reading the *Times*. He was attired in a blue cloth dressing-gown, and had a small table drawn up to his side, on which were a bottle, glass, and a [carafe] which seemed to contain barley-water. He too, wore a respirator; but he removed it for a few moments to take a little of the barley-water, and then carefully replace it, coughing hollowly the while.

“Sorry to bring you into a sick-room,” he said courteously. “Sorry, in fact, to bring you here at all, for I would much rather have chosen the trifle or two I wanted at your shop. I trust you have not brought many things, though?”

“Only a few that Mrs. Ross thought you—that your lady chose, sir,” I said.

He nodded, and then listlessly examined first one and then another ornament as I opened them out, but always with a dissatisfied air.

“Don’t you like those, dear?” said Mrs. Ross, in rather disappointed tones, as I displayed in the best lights the pearl suite.

“No; not at all,” said the invalid. “Too plain; almost vulgar.”

“Might I be allowed to suggest,” I said, earnestly, “that to see pearls to advantage, they must be worn. It is a well known fact that pearls are gems which show to as great advantage upon a dark as upon a fair complexion; and if your lady—”

I paused here, and glanced towards Mrs. Ross, who smiled graciously, and then clasped the bracelets round her shapely wrist, the necklace over her fine throat, and placed the tiara in her hair, —looking almost regal as she stood before us.

“You see the difference,” I said, drawing back.

“Yes, yes,” said the invalid impatiently; “they look well enough on her; but they are for quite a girl.—Take them off, Lilla.”

Mrs. Ross obeyed, and the ornaments were replaced in the case; when I proceeded to display the other jewels, but apparently to find no favor.

“Here, Lilla, give me a glass of sherry.—Confound this thing, it almost chokes me.” He tore off the respirator, and hurled it to the other end of the room.

“For my sake, dear,” I heard her whisper to him, as, stepping lightly across the room, she picked up the respirator, and brought it back.

“Well, there; get out the sherry, then,” he said, pettishly, as he took back the instrument.

“No, no, dear; Sir Ealing said—”

“Confound Sir Ealing! If I am to die, let me die comfortably, and not to be tortured to death. Get out the sherry, I say, —the port too.”

I saw a tear trickle down Mrs. Ross’ cheek as she fetched a couple of decanters from a sideboard where they stood with glasses.

“Haven’t you some cake, or did you send it down?” he said impatiently.

“I have it here, dear,” said Mrs. Ross softly; and she placed a portion of a small pound-cake upon the table.

“Give me a glass of sherry,” he said, impatiently.—“No, not that glass—the other—Mr.—I don’t know your name—try that sherry.” He sipped a little. “You’ll find it very good.”

“I thank you,” I said quietly; “but I never take wine in business hours.”

“Won’t you try the port, then?” he said.

“I would much rather not,” I replied.

“A little cake?” suggested the lady. “We are simple country people, and not much acquainted with London etiquette. Pray, excuse us if we trespass.”

I bowed and declined, when Mrs. Ross re-adjusted her husband’s respirator, leaning over him the while.

“Now let me see that bracelet,” said Mr. Ross, pointing to one upon the table. “But are these all you have brought?”

“Yes, sir,” I said; “but I can easily bring a fresh selection,” —though I had brought over two thousand pounds’ worth.

“Hem, yes,” he said: “of course! —Do you like that bracelet, Lilla?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Ross; “I picked it out particularly yesterday. That emerald is so beautiful.”

“Put it on,” he said, curtly; and she clasped it upon her arm.

“How much?” he said, shortly.

“Thirty-five guineas,” I replied.

“Dear,” he said— “very dear. The bracelet we bought at the shop was far more handsome at the same money.”

“No, love; it was sixty guineas,” said Mrs. Ross.

“Ah! was it? I forgot,” he said, carelessly. “Well, lay that aside: I don’t want you to come for nothing.”

I hastened to assure him that it was the wish of the firm to satisfy their patrons, as well as to sell their jewelry, and that we should only be too happy to bring or send on a fresh selection for his choice.

He assented almost rudely, and turned over the various rings, asking the prices of nearly every article I had brought, when, suddenly throwing himself impatiently back, he exclaimed, “Good heavens, Lilla, this room is insufferable: throw some of that vinegar about.”

Mrs. Ross smiled faintly; and taking a flexible tube from the mantelpiece, she pressed it, so that in a fine shower a finely scented aromatic vinegar diffused a refreshing perfume through the room.

“That’s better,” he exclaimed. —“Now show me those pearls again. How much did you say they were?”

“Four hundred guineas the suite,” I said, hastening to lay them before him.

“Take them away!” he exclaimed. “I can’t afford four hundred guineas; four hundred shillings more likely. The confounded doctor is ruining me. Let me look at the watches; or, stay, let me look at the pearls again. —No; never mind, I won’t have them unless you will take half the money.”

I smiled and shook my head. “We are not dealers of that sort, sir,” I ventured to say.

“I don’t know—I don’t know. I believe you jewelers get most terrible profits. Show me the watches.”

I was hastening to place the half-dozen I had with me in his hands, when he exclaimed again: “Insufferable! Have you any more of that vinegar, Lilla?”

Mrs. Ross nodded; and taking a cutglass bottle from her pocket, she placed it with a handkerchief by his side.

“No, no,” he said, giving me back the watches. Sprinkle the room with another of those tubes—Now you! I’ll have that little plain watch. I’m getting tired of this. Let me have a chain to match—a fine one, mind—the thinnest you have—and that will do for [today].”

As I selected four or five chains, after putting the watch aside, Mrs. Ross took up another tube, unscrewed it, and then appeared to be taking especial notice of the chains which I bore across to the invalid.

“Those are sweetly pretty,” she exclaimed. “I don’t remember noticing them so much yesterday.”

As she spoke, she stood close to my side, when, the invalid exclaimed impatiently: “There, pray, be quick, dear;” and at one and the same moment, he poured out the contents of his bottle upon his handkerchief and I felt a fine spray of a peculiar odor playing right in my nostrils.

I started back, gasping and astounded, when, leaping from the couch, the invalid exclaimed: “Good heavens, sir, you are unwell!” and he covered my face and nose with the wet handkerchief, forcing me backwards into a chair.

I believe that I struggled, but only feebly; for a strange, delicious, enervating languor was stealing over me; I saw things mistily but still with an understanding mind, seeing, though unable to move hand or foot, that the invalid was bending over me, while Mrs. Ross was hastily placing the various articles of jewelry in her pocket.

I saw all that, but in a dreamy, untroubled way, for it seemed then to be not of the slightest consequence,—not to concern me. Then I have some recollection of an intensely cold sensation as of cold water being poured over my face, while my next impression is of hearing a closing door and the click of a lock.

How long I remained in that condition, I never knew; but by degrees I woke to a feeling of deadly nausea; my head swam, my temples throbbed, and everything I gazed upon was seen through a mist of dancing motes. But by degrees, thoughts of the present began to take the place of the dreamy imaginings of the past. I started up and looked around, to find that I was still in the inner room; but the jewels—the cases—where was the invalid—where Mrs. Ross? Was it true, or was it some strange vision? It was impossible that I could have been duped like that.

I ran to the door—fastened. The other door—locked on the outside. I darted across to the bell, but in doing so, caught my foot in the long table-cover, tripped and fell, dragging the cloth onto the carpet, and revealing the whole of the jewel cases beneath the table, just as they had been hastily flung.

I could not help it then, for my brain was confused, and, stooping down, I took the cases one by one, and opened them, in the fond hope that I had been deceived, and that I should find the jewels safe; but, save one ring, which had escaped their notice, everything had been taken.

I sat on the carpet for a few minutes holding my throbbing head, and trying to recall the scene, but almost in vain, for it seemed as if a portion of my existence had been wiped completely away. I was showing tried jewelry at one moment, the next it seemed that I was seated by the empty cases. I tried to clear my faculties, but in vain; and I should think quite half an hour had elapsed before, thoroughly awakened to the fact that I had been robbed, I rang the bell.

I had nearly arrived at the extent of my loss two or three times, but only to have, as it were, a veil drawn over my senses, just as if a relapse were coming on; and then mentally blind, I could do nothing but rock myself to and fro trying to get rid of the remains of the strange stupor in which I had been plunged.

Before the waiter could ascend, I rang again.

“Where are Mr. and Mrs. Ross,” I inquired.

“Went out in a brougham some time ago, sir; and your lunch is ready.”

“My lunch?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, sir; the lunch they ordered for you.”

“O, thank you!” I said quietly; “I’ll ring again. Send my porter up in five minutes’ time.”

The waiter did not seem surprised that the door was fastened on the outside—it had not struck him then; but as soon as he had gone, I hastily repacked the empty morocco cases, and as soon as possible made my way back into Bond Street, and met the principal.

“We were just getting uneasy, Mr. Willis, and going to send after you. What have they taken?”

“Everything, sir,” I said almost fiercely.

“What!” he exclaimed.

I told all I knew, while he listened with blank amazement.

Then followed a visit to Great Scotland Yard, and to Moore’s, to find that Mr. and Mrs. Ross had not returned; while so impressed was the manager with his visitors’ respectability, that he laughed at the idea of there having been any swindling transaction. They were most respectable people, he said; paid their bills last time without a murmur; their portmanteaus and boxes [upstairs] were all in their rooms; and it was all a mistake, —“or something worse,” he added, with a dark look at me.

That it was “something worse,” was very soon evident from the tubes and bottles, and a wine-glass containing a few drops of a limpid fluid, found to corroborate my story. But though the instruments of deception, even to a couple of respirators, lined with wet sponge, were found, the depredators had made their escape, and were never found; though I verily believe that if I had watched the lady-swindlers in the various police courts, sooner or later I should have encountered the interesting Mrs. Ross.

I need hardly add, that after so heavy a loss, the firm never seemed to take thoroughly to heart the idea of a junior partnership with respect to myself; while as to my bother assistants, they laughed in their sleeves at my downfall; though, after all, I cannot see that I was much to blame, this not being by any means the first Great Jewel robbery.— *Chambers’ Journal*.

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