

Miss Whitelake's Diamonds

I.

AT the time of the remarkable occurrences about to be related, I resided with my uncle, Harrison Burche, Esq., of Fairfield. I had gone to that place to engage in the practice of law, and cheerfully accepted an invitation to make his house my home.

My uncle's family consisted of himself and wife, one son, Giles, and a young lady, Miss Hattie Whitelake, who was an orphan ward.

Giles was near my own age, and proved to be a very congenial companion. In personal appearance he was quite prepossessing, being tall, well formed, graceful in manner, and handsome in face. His mental qualities were in accord with the attractiveness of his person, and we passed many pleasant hours together.

Miss Whitelake was a blue-eyed, golden-haired beauty, whom I set down at first sight as a charming person. A more mature acquaintance confirmed my impressions, and it is easy to imagine what happened. I fell desperately in love with her before we had known each other a month. I soon declared my love, and had the inexpressible joy of learning that it was returned. There was one little drawback, however, to my bliss. Hattie often expressed a certain want of trust in humanity that was annoying in one of her age; and coupled with it was a dismal fashion of looking too much on the bad side of affairs. These unfortunate traits were first formed by occurrences in her early experience among strangers, which are unnecessary to relate. It is sufficient for us to know that they existed; and I may add that I had good cause to remember them for many a day.

My uncle favored our love-making, and so Hattie and I were engaged to be married, and the wedding was to take place soon after she became of lawful age, which would be in a little more than a year from that time.

The year rolled smoothly and quietly away. No event of any special consequence marked its passage, excepting that, as Hattie's twenty-first birthday approached, there was a bustle of preparation to celebrate the event by a grand entertainment to her friends.

She desired to have, for this occasion, some new jewels, and I accompanied her to Clearport, our nearest city, to look up the coveted articles. Her choice fell on some magnificent diamonds—a breastpin, ear-rings, and necklace, of unique pattern and exquisite workmanship. The purchase was delayed, however, because their cost was greater than the amount she had expected to expend, and, although she was quite rich enough to afford them, it was thought best by both of us to consult with her guardian again before deciding. So we went back without the diamonds.

After due consultation, she concluded to take them, and, as my uncle would have occasion to go to Clearport on other business before they would be needed, he was commissioned to get them.

I was absent from home most of the time intervening before the birthday, and, on my return, found that my uncle had been to Clearport and brought home the diamonds.

The birthday-festival passed off much as such things usually do. Nothing occurred that requires mention in this narrative. A few days afterward, however, a series of troubles commenced of the most extraordinary and perplexing character. Hattie left home to be absent a month in the country, and, having little use for her jewels, and besides not thinking it quite safe to have such valuables about her when out of town, she gave them into my care until her return. I immediately locked them up in my office-safe. The next day I had a sudden call to business in Clearport, and was absent about three weeks. On my return I was surprised to find Hattie at home again. She had become tired of the country sooner than she had expected.

A few evenings after, we had invitations to a fashionable gathering, and Hattie wished to wear her diamonds. I went to my safe to get them, and, to my inexpressible astonishment and dismay, *they were not to be found!*

There was no sign of the slightest disturbance in the safe. The lock was in perfect order, and, being of the “combination” or dial kind, could not have been picked. The only known way to get it open was by turning the dial to certain numbers in a definite order. I had told no one how I had set it when I left home, and there was scarcely one chance in a million that anybody had guessed it.

I was sure that no one outside of my uncle's family had known of my having the diamonds, and yet, whoever had committed the burglary, appeared to have them alone in view, for there were other valuables in the safe which were left untouched. These valuables were bonds belonging to several clients who had intrusted them to me for safe keeping, and were payable to “the bearer.” This fact increased the mystery. Jewels which might be easily identified had been taken, and money left behind which would have been infinitely less likely to lead to the detection of the thief.

Had the diamonds been my own, the loss would have been bad enough; under the then existing circumstances, it was a thousand times worse. My situation was horrible. Nobody had seen me put them in the safe, and, even had that been the case, I had no proof of not having taken them out again myself. I had no thought that any of my friends would for a moment suspect me of such infamous rascality as having had any thing to do with their disappearance, but you may imagine my dreadful embarrassment at the loss when I could account for it in no way at all; when my story would be entitled to belief only on account of my hitherto good character.

The most positive indication of my innocence which I could possibly have given, would have been to at once replace the diamonds, or insist on making good the loss; but alas! my entire possessions were not sufficient to pay more than half their value, if that.

All the family were, of course, greatly astonished at what had happened, but Hattie took it very coolly, and, seeing my anxiety, begged me not to worry about the misfortune, and did all she could to enforce her precept. The matter was talked over and over, however, until the novelty and wonder wore away, and then it rested.

A week or more had elapsed after discovering the robbery, when I was again called to Clearport, where I remained several days. On my return, a new development awaited me. This was a second occurrence, as mysterious as the first, and as hopelessly inexplicable.

II.

ON the day after I came home from Clearport *I found the diamonds*. And where did I find them, think you? Why, in exactly the same place from which they had so mysteriously disappeared a few weeks before. I went to my safe to get out a paper, and there were the jewels, case and all, just as I had received them from Hattie, and just as I had locked them up for her with my own hands.

We were all delighted to have them back again, you may be sure; but the mystery continued to be as perplexing as ever, or, indeed, more so. Whoever had stolen the diamonds either repented afterward, or else restored them from fear of being found out. But who was the thief? and how had he gotten twice into my safe?

Annoying as these questions were, I had yet the great satisfaction of feeling that whoever was at the bottom of the affair, I at least was cleared from the remotest suspicion of wrong-doing. Short-sighted mortals! Could I have foreseen at that time the new troubles these abominable jewels were soon to bring upon me, I should, doubtless, have wished they had sunk to the bottom of the sea, instead of having reappeared in my strong box.

I have omitted to mention that just before the loss of the diamonds my marriage with Hattie had been postponed for another year. The reasons for it were comparatively unimportant, and may be summed up by saying that I did not feel quite ready to marry. Hattie was very willing to wait, especially as we could see each other so often.

Before the first half of this year had gone, I made an unpleasant discovery. Giles Burche was learning to think too much of Hattie Whitelake. He knew of her engagement, and, although I could not say positively that he was endeavoring to supplant me, I had good reason to believe it. Not a word was spoken, but Giles soon perceived my suspicions. We understood each other, and from that time the breach between us widened until cold, formal politeness took the place of our friendship. Hattie noticed this, of course, and several times asked the reason. I was then jealous enough to believe she only affected ignorance, and stubbornly avoided an answer.

Matters had gone on in this way for a month, when Hattie went to Clearport, saying she had some little affairs of business to look after, and would be home again in a couple of days. She did not return as promised, but instead there came a letter from her to me. When I received it I had a secret misgiving that something had gone wrong, but was utterly unprepared for what was to come. It was a dreadful letter; how dreadful you shall see for yourself:

“MR. ARTHUR BURCHE—

“SIR: It becomes my painful duty to tell you that since I left home, a few days ago, I have found out something about the *burglary* that occurred some time ago, which makes it necessary for me

to break off our engagement at once. I perhaps ought not say any thing more, yet I feel that I must tell you how I found out your villainy.

“A week or two ago I read something in a newspaper about how artificial diamonds were made, and the article wound up with an anecdote about a lady who had been so cleverly deceived by her own husband that she had worn false diamonds for years, and never would have known any better if it had not been for an accident. After I read this I began to wonder if the diamonds I have now were the same ones I had given you to keep. I didn't want to suspect you, but the more I tried to drive away the thought of it, the more it haunted me, until I said to myself, ‘I'll go up to Clearport and have my diamonds examined, just to be rid of my foolish, wicked thoughts about Arthur.’ I had no idea of what I was to learn; it was a dreadful discovery, but it is well for me that I made it in time. *My diamonds are all counterfeits*. But why should I tell you, who already know all about it? I got back from my country visit a little too soon for you. It is all as plain to me now as it has been all along to you. I understand how the diamonds got out of your safe, why you had ‘business’ in Clearport the day after I went to the country, and how my jewels happened to be found again in such a strange way.

“But enough; vilely as you have deceived me, I will not betray you. I will keep your secret as long as I live. In return, I ask you to go away from Fairfield. Invent any excuse you can, and spare me the pain of ever meeting you hereafter. I shall stay here a month, and then hope to hear that you have done what I ask.

“H. W.”

As soon as I recovered from the shock this fearful letter gave me, I naturally cast about in my mind for some means of escape from the toils which had been thrown around me in such a mysterious manner, but I could not think of the least clew that would lead me out. The diamonds might possibly have been counterfeits when they left the hands of the jewelers, but, from the reputation of the firm, I could hardly suspect them, or think they would have risked their credit even if disposed to be dishonest; and, had I believed them guilty of fraud, I had no more ability to prove it than I had to show how the jewels had disappeared from my custody. All the facts in the case pointed to but one conclusion in my mind. Some one had managed, in some way I could not guess, to get the diamonds out of my safe during my absence, and had substituted false ones to conceal the robbery. The robber had evidently been delayed in carrying out his scheme, but finally completed it in the hope that the jewels had not been missed, or that, if they had, the trick would not be suspected when they reappeared. But who was the thief? Circumstances undeniably pointed to me, and I had no proof to give that would show my innocence.

Only one resource remained—to throw myself back on my honor. I thought at first of going immediately to see Hattie, but I doubted if she would receive me, and so concluded to write instead. Her answer killed all hope: “I could not trust you after what has happened. Unless I *know* that you are innocent, we can never meet again.” I now believed that my jealousy had been well founded. After this peremptory refusal to even discuss the matter, I began to think that Hattie wished to be rid of me, and was glad of so good excuse for breaking our engagement.

Nothing was now left for me to do but to leave Fairfield. I told my uncle that Hattie and I disagreed. He anxiously inquired the cause. I told him that must be known only to Hattie and myself. He was very reluctant to hear to my going away, and insisted on interposing his kind offices, but I felt that they would be of no use; and, besides, my pride was now so stung that I did not want a reconciliation. So I left him, to travel a month or two, determining that I would after that settle in or near Clearport, and devote all the time and energy I could spare to unraveling the dreadful mystery of the diamonds.

III.

I RESUME my story at a period about three months subsequent to the events narrated in the last chapter. I had found some relief from my troubles in the excitements of travel, and then carried out my determination of locating in Clearport. I had quitted Fairfield in such a distracted state of mind that I did not feel as if I could consult with any one, or make any arrangements for professional assistance. You may think it strange I should have delayed so long, but the truth is that, appearances being so strong against me, I shrank from laying open my case to any one even in a professional way. I had another good reason, too, for my delay. Soon after I left Fairfield, a suspicion dawned on my mind of who the criminal might be. I actually dreaded the idea of proving this suspicion to be correct, for the person I had fixed on was my cousin, Giles Burche. And, if it should be he, I felt that I would rather keep the matter in my own hands. I am afraid I felt too much like screening him from justice if he should be found guilty, but I reasoned that it would be bad enough in this case to show who was the thief to those who must know it. With such a one as Giles, I felt that the punishment of exposure to his friends would be severe enough, and that he could be, perhaps, reclaimed by such a mild measure, while harsher ones would hurry him to destruction.

While I was thinking out a plan of action, I had an invitation to go to Four Oaks to meet a friend. Four Oaks was a little village on the line of railway running from Clearport to Fairfield. It was only an hour's ride from the former place, and I went down early in the morning, expecting to return late in the evening. But my friend and I had so much to talk about that I agreed to remain overnight. He having business that separated us for a couple of hours in the evening, I set out alone for a stroll. The weather was delightful, and the fresh country air tempted me to prolong my walk beyond the bounds of the village. I wandered on until the shades of night began to fall, reminding me that it was time to retrace my steps. I was just on the point of turning about, when something caught my eye that caused me to hurry forward instead. The road I had chosen ran parallel with the railroad, and, from the point I had reached, I could see the lines of iron stretching far out into the distance. A little way ahead of me one of the rails appeared to have lost its mate. The line was unbroken on the one side; on the other it had disappeared. When I came up to the place, my worst fears were realized. A piece of timber, bridging a narrow culvert, had become unsound, and partially given way under the last train that had passed over, and the rail had been so broken that the next one must inevitably been thrown from the track. The damage must have been done by the hindmost car of a freight-train, and the jar, strange to say, have been so slight that no one aboard had noticed it.

I knew very little about the running of the trains, and, while I was gone to give warning of the danger, one of them might meet with destruction. I thought of an expedient. I would kindle a fire

beside the track, that would be a sure signal that something was wrong. I had a case of matches in my pocket, and there was some dry fencing near which promised material for the fire. But I lacked kindling. The only resource was to whittle off enough splinters for the purpose with my pocket-knife. I was just about to commence my work, when I heard a sound which seemed to freeze my blood. It was the low, faint thunder of an approaching train. On the side where I stood the road-bed was level with the earth; on the opposite side it was supported by an embankment twenty feet high. The rail nearest the precipice was the one that had been broken.

Louder and louder grew the sullen roar of the wheels, and yet I was so paralyzed with terror that I could not move. I do not know how long I stood thus; it seemed an age. At last I recovered myself, and rushed forward to do what I could to save the train. It was now so near that I had not run more than a few hundred yards before it came in sight. I still rushed forward, now shouting and throwing up my arms. On came the train under full speed, and no sign was given that I had been seen or heard. In a few moments it would reach me. Mustering all my strength I made one last grand effort. "Stop for your life!" I shouted, as the engine flew past me.

I was heard! Quick and sharp came the whistle for brakes. In a moment more a shower of sparks was flying from the track, and I knew that the engine had been reversed. The speed of the train was now checked a little; could it yet be saved? A moment of unutterable suspense and horror followed. Too late! The momentum carried it on to the fatal place, and headlong it went down over the steep embankment.

I will not distress you with the horrors I saw when I made my way back to the culvert. There were plenty of uninjured passengers to care for the wounded until help arrived, and, glad to escape from the scene, I set out as fast as my limbs would carry me toward Four Oaks. As I neared the village I was fortunate enough to meet two men on horseback, who, of course, immediately turned about to give the alarm. The people were soon aroused, and hurried to the wreck with hand-cars and wagons, and the removal of the dead and wounded to Four Oaks was commenced with all possible expedition. Three persons had been killed outright, and a dozen or more seriously injured. I remained at the station, anxiously watching to see if any one of my acquaintance was among the sufferers. My vague fears were realized. My cousin Giles was one of the dangerously wounded.

Under other circumstances I do not suppose I could have brought myself to treat him with even common civility, but when I saw him lying before me senseless, and perhaps dying, my hard thoughts melted away, and I was ready to do what I could for him to the uttermost. I procured the most comfortable quarters I could and the best medical attendance, and then, of course, sent for his parents. They arrived the next morning and found Giles delirious. A severe blow on the head had stunned him, and, as consciousness returned, a raging fever set in. For many days and nights we watched the struggle between Life and Death. When the crisis came that was to decide the battle, Life gained the victory. Giles fell into a peaceful slumber, and awoke saved.

When I went in to see him the next day his wan face lighted up with a smile, and as soon as I got near enough he reached out his thin, white hand, saying: "Arthur, my dear old boy, how can I ever thank you? Mother has told me all—you saved my life."

IV.

FOR the first eight or ten days after the fever had gone, Giles remained so weak that he was unable to converse beyond a few words at long intervals. During this time I was frequently in his room, and he always appeared to be pleased to see me. Here was a new puzzle. Day after day he welcomed me in a manner so confiding, and with a look so innocent, that I began to doubt if it were possible that he could be guilty of the crime with which he stood charged in my mind. Could it be, I asked myself, that one who looked so fair should be so unutterably foul? Yet I had weighty reasons for believing that Giles was the man who had stolen the diamonds.

I continued in this bewildered state until Giles himself threw a weight into the scales that turned them for the second time against him. As soon as he was able to speak at all in more than monosyllables, he said to me: "Arthur, I have done you a wrong. I am too weak yet to tell you more. I have tried to *look* so you would know that I wanted to be at peace with you." I now believed, of course, that Giles alluded to his endeavor to supplant me in the affections of Miss Whitelake; I believed, further, that he had something to tell me about the loss of the diamonds. How far I was right you will very soon discover, as I had not long to wait for my cousin's revelations.

A few days after he had first named the matter he felt strong enough to tell me what was on his mind. It was still hard work for the poor fellow to talk, but he seemed so intent on telling his story that I could not prevail on him to wait, and, to tell the truth, I was so overpowered by the desire to hear it that I made but a feeble show of resistance. He had evidently arranged that our interview should have no witnesses, for we were left alone very soon after I came in.

"Arthur," he began, "you know what I want to tell you about?"

"Yes," said I.

He smiled faintly and nodded, and then, after a little pause, resumed: "I was a very great villain, Arthur, to do as I did. But it seemed to me I couldn't help loving her. I parted you two, but I mean to bring you together again. Hattie never did care any thing for me, after all. I found that out the day before I left Fairfield, and was on my way to see you and tell you to come back, when I was stopped by the accident."

He paused now as though he had finished, and looked for me to make some reply. Human nature could no longer resist. Right or wrong, I would make a bold stroke.

"Never mind about that now," said I; "tell me about the diamonds."

Giles looked puzzled—as though he did not know why I had asked the question—but promptly replied, with a smile:

"Ah, you guessed it was I who took them! It was."

“But how,” I persisted, “did you get them?”

With an air of surprise, as though he supposed that, by guessing one part of the riddle, I had discovered all, he replied:

“Why, I hit on the right figures to open your lock.”

He paused to rest, and I had time to reflect on his singular behavior. I found myself losing patience. Instead of waiting to hear a full explanation of how the safe had been opened—how he had managed to find out the combination on which I had locked it—I interrupted him with, “Come, come, Giles, I am ready to forgive you all the wrong you have done me, but I don't like to hear you speak so lightly and unconcernedly about so dreadfully serious a thing.”

Once more the puzzled look came into his face, and he said:

“I don't quite understand you.”

At this I could contain myself no longer.

“How *can* you talk so, Giles,” I cried, “after robbing Hattie, and then suffering me to be branded as the thief?”

“For Heaven's sake, Arthur,” he rejoined, “what do you mean?”

I was blind with indignation. I could not see the mischief I was doing.

“Mean,” retorted I, with a sneer, as a new idea flashed into my mind, “I mean that you are a greater scoundrel than I thought you a moment ago. I understand you now. You thought I didn't know that Hattie's diamonds were never returned, and that you put back in their place only a vile imitation!”

I shall never forget the look of horror and dismay that Giles gave me, as I finished. His eyes rested on me but a moment; he gave a short gasp for breath; a deathly pallor crept over his face, and, for a moment or two, I thought I had killed him.

I, of course, lost no time in calling for help. My cousin lay for some time in a death-like swoon, but by-and-by began slowly to revive. As soon as I saw this I quietly withdrew, for fear the sight of me might do fresh damage.

That night Giles was again very ill. I was overpowered by anxiety and stricken by remorse. My troubles were intensified by my solicitude to learn the remainder of the story I had so rashly interrupted. If Giles should die now, I might never hear it, and would then be left more hopelessly in the dark than before.

V.

MY worst fears for Giles were happily not realized. In a few days I had the intense satisfaction of knowing that he was again out of danger. I dared not risk another interview until there was no chance of a second relapse; and, as the best way of avoiding it, left Four Oaks for home. Giles made anxious inquiries for me, but I refused to return until the doctor assured his mother that it would be safe. I then went down. I had scarcely got into my cousin's room, when he asked his other friends to retire, and at once commenced on the old subject, by saying:

“Arthur, do you believe that I could do such a thing as you accused me of the last time I saw you?”

I was silent. I really did not know what reply to make.

Giles looked at me with painful anxiety expressed in every feature of his countenance.

“I see you doubt me,” he continued; “and you have a right to; but I declare most solemnly that I took the diamonds only for a jest, and that, for all I know, I put them back again. If false ones were put in their place, it must have been done while I had them in my desk. However that may be, I swear to you I am innocent.”

He looked so distressed and so honest that all my sympathies were moved for him.

“Giles,” I cried, “I would fain believe you, and I will try hard to do it. Let me hear all your story from the beginning.”

“Well, you know you got your safe not long before the diamonds were bought.”

“Yes.”

“And don't you remember that we had quite an argument about the new lock? You said it could not possibly be opened by anybody unless he knew the figures on which it had been set, and I said I believed that, by practice, one might feel a little jar in the knob when the stops inside fell into their places, and so open it without knowing any thing about the figures.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you were so set in your notion, that I secretly resolved to try and prove you were wrong, if I could. When you got the diamonds, it came into my head that it would be a good joke to take them out of the safe. I was alone in your office long enough to try my experiment the very evening after you locked them up, and I succeeded. I intended to tell you that evening, but something prevented, and the next morning you went away before I had a chance to see you. I then had time to think about what I had done, and the jest began to look rather serious. It came to my mind that, if you were ever robbed afterward in earnest, I might be suspected of doing it. The more I thought about it, the more risky and foolish did my joke appear to be, and I determined to put the diamonds back, and say nothing about what I had done. As you took the key of your

office away with you, I had no chance to get in while you were gone, and none when you came back, until after the loss had been discovered. The hubbub made about it frightened me a little, and I saw more clearly than ever what a fool I had been. I suppose I ought to have told you then, but I didn't and, by some strange fatality, you were busy every day in your office at the only time I could be there. As the matter wouldn't be made any worse, I waited for my chance, and got the diamonds back in the safe the evening before you went away on your second journey. Again I swear to you that I took them only for a joke, and, for aught I know to the contrary, put them back again just as I had found them."

Giles's story was straightforward enough, but, much as I was inclined to give him the benefit of my doubts, it was far from clearing him of suspicion. Not very long after the robbery, I had heard that the new locks had been so readily opened on several occasions in the way described by Giles, that the inventor had added an attachment to overcome the unlooked-for danger. Giles had doubtless heard of this also, and, knowing that I could scarcely forget the talk we had had about the lock when I first got my safe, he would naturally suppose that he might be suspected. It was just from these two things, in fact, that my suspicion of him had been aroused. And when I charged him with the robbery, might he not have felt so sore that I had some positive evidence against him, that he chose this clever way of escaping? The case looked very bad for him.

"Giles," said I, after I had revolved the matter over and over in my mind, "where did you keep the diamonds all the time they were in your possession?"

"In a drawer in my desk, which I kept locked all the time," he replied.

"Did you ever look at them during that time?"

"Yes, nearly every day, to see if they were safe."

These answers were given so frankly that, considering the very damaging character of the admissions they contained, they favored a belief in my cousin's innocence. But the stubborn fact remained that, if he had watched the diamonds as closely as he admitted, it would have been next to impossible for any one to have had them out without his knowledge, much less to have been able to keep them long enough to have substituted counterfeits for the genuine.

We talked the matter over again and again, without any further result. I could only tell Giles that I did not know what to think, and that I hoped to be able to prove him innocent. With that I left him, and, by the first train afterward, returned to Clearport.

VI.

I NOW determined to do what I perhaps ought to have done at the first, namely, give my case into the hands of a well-practiced detective. By a little inquiry, I learned that one Fabius Kraff was considered the most skillful man in this line to be found in Clearport, and to him I accordingly went. I found Mr. Kraff to be a singular compound of youthfulness and experience. He was small and thin, and not very attractive in appearance, and, though apparently not over twenty-five years

old, had the manners of a man of forty. His gray eyes were keen and penetrating, and he had such a decided thief-taking air about him that I at once felt sure he was a proper person for my task.

I told my story as briefly as possible, and he listened with the closest attention. As soon as I had finished, he expressed a lively interest in the case, and asked why I had not come to him at the first. I explained my motives, and made a condition that any discoveries he might make should be kept strictly between ourselves until I should otherwise direct. Mr. Kraff assented, but continued to lament the loss of time.

“Delays are dangerous, sir,” he said; “delays spoil many a good case, and it's mighty likely you've spoiled this one by waiting so long.”

He was willing enough, however, to undertake it, and said he would do his best. After questioning me closely concerning all the particulars, and making a few notes in his memorandum-book, Mr. Kraff promised that he would immediately set to work, and would let me hear from him as soon as he had any thing definite to say. I then left him.

The day after this interview, I received a note from the detective, which ran as follows:

“Can you tell me the name of the party that said the diamonds were not diamonds?”

I could not, and replied to that effect. Mr. Kraff wrote again, saying that it was important for him to know, and he would like me to inquire of Miss Whitelake. I wondered why he asked me to do this, instead of seeing or writing her himself, and it was with a great deal of reluctance that I undertook to comply. After what had passed between Hattie and myself, it was a hard task to approach her again, and it was only after spoiling three or four sheets of paper that I got a letter at all in shape to suit me. I wrote thus:

“MISS WHITELAKE—

“I am still pursuing my inquiries regarding the loss of your diamonds. The officer who is assisting me wishes the address of the person who pronounced your jewels counterfeit. Will you oblige by forwarding it to —

“Yours respectfully,

“ARTHUR BURCHE.”

In due course I received the following answer:

“DEAR MR. BURCHE—

“I have long wished to take back what I once said to you, but both pride and shame have kept me from it. My conscience would have forced me to it sooner or later, I hope, but I am so glad you have helped me, by your note, to do it now. You know my dreadful disposition to doubt

everybody. I repent it bitterly, and I am heartily sorry I ever doubted you, for I feel sure now that you had nothing to do with the loss of the diamonds. Forgive me for ever suspecting you.

“As nobody knows that I accused you of taking them, and as I am now *perfectly* satisfied that you did not, there is no need to go to any more trouble about them. Indeed, I would much rather you should not. I think I now really know the one that is to blame, and if I am right it will be better for us not to see it proved.

“Again I ask you to forget what has happened, and believe me to be

“Your friend,

“HATTIE.”

This letter gave me an entirely new suspicion. After charging me with an infamous crime, why did Miss Whitelake want me to stop in my efforts to clear myself? Might it not be that she herself had invented the whole story about the falsification of the diamonds in order to break off our engagement? Badly as I had been treated by Hattie, I had never before suspected her for an instant of any greater fault than the one which has already been repeatedly mentioned, and I was horror-stricken at the new turn that the mystery of the diamonds had taken in my mind.

I hurried to Mr. Kraff and showed him the letter. He smiled and said, in a confident way, that it was just the kind of an answer he had expected; and I then understood why this wily man had got me to question Miss Whitelake instead of doing it himself.

“You see a little way into this?” queried he.

“You suspect that Miss Whitelake's story is not true,” I replied.

“It may be true and it may not,” he answered, with characteristic caution, “and our first business is to find that out.”

“The only reason I know for inventing the story,” said I, “would have been to get rid of me. Is it possible she should do such a thing when there was no need of it; when she could have accomplished her wishes without it?”

“Almost any thing is possible,” replied Mr. Kraff, “but it won't do to be too sure of what is and what isn't. There *might* have been a need of doing it according to her way of thinking, and there might not. Had she a fancy to any other young man besides you?”

“Not that I know, unless it was my cousin Giles, and he says she never cared any thing about him.”

Mr. Kraff knitted his brows a little at this, and then fell to rubbing his forehead gently, as though that was his customary way of developing ideas. He soon rubbed out a conclusion.

“It might have been,” said he, “that she had some strong reason for wanting to marry this gentleman you speak of, and still liked you a great deal better all the time. Well, if you had stayed where she was, she might not have been able to keep up her resolution, and the only safe plan was to get you away and keep you away.”

My distress at this confirmation of my suspicions showed so plainly in my face that the detective immediately added:

“Wait a little, Mr. Burche—wait a little; we don't *know* any thing about the case yet.”

His words encouraged me. A new gleam of hope came into my mind for the woman I had once loved so dearly.

“If Miss Whitelake went to the length you suppose possible to get rid of me,” said I, “why should she afterward refuse my cousin when he wanted to marry her?”

“If she did refuse him,” replied Mr. Kraff, “that can be answered easy enough. She might have repented, or maybe your cousin wasn't the man in the case after all.”

My heart sank again. At that moment felt I would rather be suspected all my life of being a thief than to find out that Hattie Whitelake herself was the author of my trouble. After an assurance of further active investigation from Mr. Kraff I left him, and went home more thoroughly distressed about the mystery of the diamonds than I had ever been before.

VII.

DURING the next two weeks I heard nothing from Mr. Kraff, and, though I called several times at his office, could never find him at home.

About the end of that time he telegraphed me from Fairfield, saying, “Come down tomorrow, if you possibly can.”

You may be sure that, when the morrow came, I obeyed the call.

The detective met me at the station, and, in reply to my eager question of “What news?” said he had some, but he could not tell me just then.

“Let us go to your uncle's,” he added; “we can talk it over there, and I hope straighten matters all up.”

This dispelled the lingering doubts I had in regard to Kraff's discoveries. It was plain to me now that Miss Whitelake was guilty. The mystery, before so impenetrable, was now as clear to my mind as day. And yet the more certain I became of the solution the more I dreaded to have it proved. In spite of all that had happened, I had never been able to fully rid myself of my old attachment. Already I began to frame excuses for Hattie, and to feel that, if she would freely

confess her fault, I would be fully ready to forgive her. I dreaded the idea of seeing her humiliated before a stranger, and begged Kraff to let me take the matter in my own hand again.

“You recollect that you didn't get along so well with it before by yourself, don't you?” he asked.

I had to acknowledge that I did.

“Well, you had better let me have it my way a little longer, or you'll be sure to spoil it again.”

I felt that I could not help myself, and, as we had nearly reached my uncle's house, I passively submitted to what appeared inevitable.

When our ring was answered, Mr. Kraff gave his name only, and asked for Mr. Burche.

We were shown into the familiar library, and in a few minutes my uncle made his appearance. He was glad to see me, but evidently surprised, especially as Mr. Kraff was an entire stranger to him. After an introduction, we all chatted a little about commonplace affairs. Mr. Kraff seemed in no hurry to introduce his business, but calmly awaited a favorable pause. He took advantage, however, of the first one that offered.

“Mr. Burche,” said he, addressing my uncle, “I have come to see you about a little matter that's rather unpleasant, and, as it ought to be a strictly private one, may I bolt the door?”

With much surprise, my uncle assented.

The detective continued:

“You remember, of course, that some diamonds belonging to Miss Whitelake, a young friend of yours, turned up missing a year or so ago, and then were found again in a curious sort of way. Well, Miss Whitelake said afterward that the diamonds that came back were not the real article, and she thought that this gentleman, my client, was the person who stole them. It was a very mixed-up case, but I think I have it all untwisted now. There's only a trifling difficulty remaining, which I think you can settle for us.”

Mr. Kraff paused; my uncle said not a word; I listened with breathless anxiety for what was to come next.

The detective's voice was a little firmer than before when he resumed:

“Mr. Burche, appearances are deceitful things, but I got ahead of them after all. Mr. Harrison Burche, *you are the man that stole the diamonds!*”

“Great Heaven! can it be?” I groaned.

My uncle made no reply, but sat stock-still in his chair, a picture of helpless misery.

“I see you are not disposed to contradict what I say,” resumed Mr. Kraff, “but it will be better to have a fair understanding of this case while we're all together here. We'll have a little private trial among ourselves, which may save the trouble of going to court. I'll be the witness, and this young gentleman shall be the judge and jury. My evidence is, that a year or so ago, Miss Whitelake asked you to get her a certain set of diamonds from Messrs. Harley and Brother, jewelers, of Clearport. You bought them on or about the first day of May, A. D. 18—. On the same day you took these same diamonds to Monsieur Cambre, of the city aforesaid, and engaged him to take them out of their settings and put back a first-class imitation in place. He finished the job according to order, and, on the 15th day of May, you brought the counterfeit diamonds to this town, and handed them over to Miss Whitelake, making believe, of course, that they were the real ones she had seen and asked you to get. Monsieur Cambre did not know you, but he remembered about the jewelry, and described the man that brought it. I managed to get a good picture of you to show him, and he says you are the party. —Mr. Judge,” asked the detective, turning to me, “what do you think of the evidence?”

My uncle saved me the trouble of answering.

With a sudden effort he roused himself from his desperate calmness, and pleaded:

“Spare me, Arthur; I am guilty!”

My horror and indignation began to give way to pity for the wretched man before me.

“I was so strongly tempted by need of money,” he continued, “you cannot tell how strongly; I've repented bitterly enough, but I never was able to make restitution.”

We at once sent for Hattie.

She was, of course, surprised, but evidently glad to see me again. I proceeded immediately to tell her what had passed between my uncle and myself.

“It is true, Hattie,” he faltered; “I am guilty!”

“I am not much surprised,” said she, “for I have more than half suspected you for some time.”

I was fully vindicated.

Now, what was to be done with the criminal?

We, of course, shrank from the idea of handing him over to the officers of the law, and any misgivings we might have had in regard to our duty were quieted by the reflection that in his case remorse and exposure had already inflicted all the punishment that would be of any use. We agreed to bury his secret with ourselves. No one else knew of it, for even Cambre had heard no names, or any particulars of the case, and would likely never see my uncle again if the latter did not put himself in the way.

But little more remains to be told. You will readily imagine that, after the mystery of the diamonds had been solved, I had a strong disposition to make up with Hattie, and, as she had long before repented of having doubted me, I had no trouble in regaining my former place in her favor.

My uncle left Fairfield with his family soon after his guilt was discovered, and we never saw him again. He died in a few years after leaving his old home.

In due time Hattie Whitelake became Mrs. Arthur Burche. With this important event my story ends.

JOHN H. SNIVLEY.

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