No Robbery.

I.

Mrs. Christie's was anything but an unpleasant house, and the people who were staying in it were anything but unpleasant. My preconceived notion had been that the folks one would meet in a boarding house were of a doubtful sort; at the best it seemed inevitable that there would be social cats purring inquisitively and treacherously all about. So it was a welcome surprise to find the house so different from my anticipations.

Mrs. Christie herself I knew but slightly. She was the widow of a mining engineer who had done good service to our family in my father's day. She had set up a boarding house in Russell street, and when it happened that I had to go up to town to consult my old college friend Marton, now a barrister, about some busisess, instead of putting up at my usual quarters I went, at my mother's request, to Mrs. Christie's, not without some misgivings about the wisdom of the step I was taking, but I thought that anyhow it would be a new experience, and that was just what it did prove to be eventually.

The company was made up of an Indian army doctor and his daughter, she being a damsel fair to look upon, two spinsters from Shropshire, a west country parson and his wife, Mrs. Christie's nephew, a clerk in bank; myself and a couple about whom no one knew anything—save Mrs. Christie, and she not much—but whom every one allowed to be the most charming and delightful people they had met for many a day. Mr. and Mrs. Walcot had traveled much and were evidently well read, but they neither wearied one's ears with the glories of Capri or Granada nor pestered you with talk about books they had read and you hadn't. They made no display, and, though brilliant conversationalists, they were just the pleasant kind of people in whose company you could sit without wanting to talk at all.

He was a tall, sparsely built man, well set up, with regular features, a man of fine bearing, yet not quite like a soldier. She was hardly so distinguished looking as her husband, hardly so handsome; her features just missed regularity, but eyes and mouth had a fascinating piquancy of expression which made her the most attractive woman I had ever met. I thought so then, and I think so still, though I have considerably extended my experience since those days when my mother guarded her fledgling from the attacks, rapacious or insidious, of every breed of harpy. But the most pleasing trait in this couple was that, though so plainly devoted to one another and satisfied with their own company, they were not wholly eaten up with mutual admiration; their nature seemed to have a sympathetic feeling that molded itself to suit the dispositions of those around without sacrificing its own individuality. No wonder all liked them. I was particularly grateful for their courtesy, not being blessed in either looks or style. I had unfortunately inherited my mother's manner and my father's face; had it been the other way about I should doubtless have proved the social success which I was painfully conscious that I now was not. And it must have been out of pure good nature that they were so friendly, for I had made it a point with Mrs. Christie—whether she kept her promise I do not know—that she should say nothing to her guests about Earnshaw Hall, or the mines, or the plate and pictures, or my mother's famous diamonds, or the glories of a country house that women love.

The only one who did not take kindly to them was Marton. On the Thursday after we had concluded our business I prevailed on him to dine with me at Mrs. Christie's, and I remember noting how every one seemed to be at his best. Even Marton's severe features relaxed and he showed himself almost more than courteous to the Indian girl, between whom and one of the Shropshire spinsters he was sitting, evidently satisfied with his environment, as he owned when I was "setting him back," as they say in the north, to his chambers, "but—but—"

"But me no buts; what is wrong now?"

"Why, those people to whom you have taken so violently, the Walcots."

"What about them, Mr. Censor?"

"They give me an uncomfortable feeling; not that they look uncanny, but I am haunted by the ghost of some forbidding reminiscence as if I had seen that woman's eyes before—and I am sure I have—but when or where I cannot recollect; and I am equally sure they were connected with something shady—what that too was I cannot bethink me; a hazy indefinite recollection it was, but one that clung to me all the while."

"May I suggest dyspepsia, too hard work indoors, too little exercise?"

"Maybe you are right, but do you too use a pinch of caution in cementing your new friendship? Good night."

II.

A few evenings before I went home, as Walcot and I were in the smoking room, I asked him if he would not bring Mrs. Walcot down to Earnshaw for a few days. It was near the end of May; May fly fishing would be on during the next ten days, so there would be something to do besides seeing the country, which was magnificent. There were a few show places for those who cared for them, and the season was at its prime for drives over the hills. I put forward all the attractions of the place to induce him to come down. I could see that Mrs. Walcot would hit it off with my not too easily pleased mother, especially because, being married, she could not possibly be a siren, and the man had plenty to talk about, yet never tired one with talking of himself.

I was rather surprised then when he hesitated about accepting an invitation so unreservedly given. Why should he stammer and, I thought, positively blush and hesitate about so simple a matter? especially as at first he seemed eager to come, for his face had lighted up so cheerily, but was obscured directly afterwards by a gloomy look, almost one of sadness. There was certainly a tone of distress in his voice as he said: "You are very kind. I and my wife—I know I can speak for her—should greatly like to come northward, but it is scarcely possible." This came with more warmth of desire to accept the invitation than depth of conviction about its impossibility. After some further pressure, evidently yielding, at last he said:

"You are so really friendly that it would be no less ungrateful than ungracious to keep back from you the real reason why we shrink from what promises to be so pleasant a visit; and what we have seen of you in the past week frees me from any doubt that you will not let what I tell you go further than yourself. My wife, to whom, as you know, I am devotedly attached, has a sad affliction. Until her illness two years ago there was not a trace of what would now make her life an intolerable burden were she not supported by our strong mutual affection and confidence. After that illness she developed kleptomania. Till then the most scrupulously honest and precisely exact woman I have ever known, she now has a strange passion for secreting, not anything and everything, but only jewelry; strangely her ailment only runs in this groove. By keeping a strict watch I have hitherto been fortunate enough to restore whatever trinkets she has surreptitiously removed. A few intimates only know of our trouble, and as they understand how things are we feel less unhappy; still, one is anxious, and this is why we have rather shrunk from accepting the many invitations we receive from the friends who we believe have a genuine regard for us."

"I think you might reckon me among them," said I, "and now that I know and am, so to speak, forewarned, why should you hesitate? I could tell my mother what you have told me before you come, unless"—seeing something of a doubt in his face—"you would rather I didn't."

"To tell the truth," he said after a pause, "if the knowledge could be confined to yourself I think it would be better. Possibly there may be trouble while we are with you—I am assuming that you would still be willing to have us—and then there would be no need to have thus bared our wounds."

"Very well; if anything does happen we will find it out, and you can send back whatever is taken, and then I can explain it all to my mother; and if anything is taken nobody will be any the wiser. You see, too, Mrs. Walcot need not know anything about my mother's jewels."

"Pray, are they very valuable or attractive?"

"Both; and my mother is rather careless, as I think, about these treasures, which are chiefly diamonds. She will keep them in a cabinet in her boudoir, the last place, she says, where a burglar would search, if one could get in. The windows look out on the cliff over the river, and our servants are trustworthy. She says she will not have them long, and we must indulge an old woman's whims. Still, we will not parade them or even speak of them at all before Mrs. Walcot."

"Yes," said he, looking relieved, "that will be best; you will not let her know of their existence. And, now that you know all, I shall be happy to bring my wife; only, by the way, pray don't breathe a word to madam to intimate to her that you know what I have just told you, for if she even suspected you knew, nothing on earth would induce her to come northward."

"So be it. My mother will write—let me see, this is Tuesday—you will get her invitation on Thursday, so that you can accept and come down, if it suits your convenience, on Saturday; then our arrangements will fit in."

III.

A few leaves from my diary:

"Friday, May 30—M. wrote to the Walcots; marvelously civil. Signed deeds. Lunch with Marton. Walcots cheery at dinner, evidently pleased with prospects of visit, especially as M. had not forgotten to invite 'Venus.'

"Saturday, 31st—Down by 10 express. Wonder of wonders, M. at station with the piebald ponies; but she takes marvelously to Mrs. Walcot. Two days' rain. There'll be a good water to-morrow, of course, when we mayn't fish.

"Sunday, June 1—Lively as usual, but take the Walcots up the glen in the evening to my favorite spot. Mr. Walcot is enraptured with the place.

"Monday, 2d—Off early in the drizzle to fish. Really a good day, thirty-four brace of trout. Walcot not half a bad hand. Have to leave the womankind at home; hope they won't get into mischief.

"Tuesday, 3d—A really good day, fifty-three brace and three sea fish. M. drives Mrs. Walcot over the hill to see the mines.

"Wednesday, 4th—Sessions. M. drives the Walcots to Ulleswater. At dinner telegram for Walcot. Says they, or at least he, must go early to-morrow. M. wants him to leave madame till Saturday. She consents, keeping Venus. The dog's useless as a guard; heard the beast snuffing in the corridor during the night.

"Thursday, 5th—Venus rambling again; heard her when stable clock struck 2. Walcot goes. Stroll in woods all morning. Teach Mrs. Walcot to fly fish in afternoon.

"Friday, 6th—Much as yesterday, but fish with Mrs. Walcot in morning. Drive after lunch.

"Saturday, 7th—See Mrs. Walcot off at 11. Dreadfully dull day. Hope Marton, anyhow, won't disappoint me. He's sure to come as I asked him, now the Walcots have gone.

"Sunday, 8th—As per usual, yet I survive.

"Monday, 9th—Here's a strange matter. Walcot writes that after all she did take my mother's diamonds. Luckily he found it out immediately on her arrival and has sent them heavily insured by train from Leamington to Penrith to wait there, not wanting to attract attention at Earnshaw by a registered packet of that size coming by post. Drive to Penrith, find parcel; mighty thankful to get diamonds; quietly replace in the cabinet. By greatest luck M. had never discovered their absence. By the way, how did Mrs. Walcot know about the diamonds? Walcot would not tell her, of course. Suppose she and mater got talking, and they must have been exhibited one of those days we were fishing. Can't ask M.; must wait, I suppose. Perhaps the poor thing felt the beginning of the craving and concealed her knowledge from her husband, or just possibly didn't see them till he had gone. However, all's well that ends well."

IV.

Had all ended well? The night after Marton came he made many inquiries over our pipes about the Walcots, and still seemed to have an unaccountable prejudice against them. It was no good to show how much my mother also thought of him, and how taking yet simple his wife was, till at last I grew quite warm in defense of my new friends, and for proof positive told Marton in what a straightforward way Walcot had informed me of his wife's failing, and how quickly he had taken pains to remedy what had happened. Marton listened very quietly to my arguments with his sphinxlike face, which, only as I concluded, relaxed into a grim smile almost more aggravating than his former impenetrability.

"What on earth makes you look like that?" said I a trifle hotly.

"Dear boy," said Marton dryly, "if I told you you would only be more angry than you are now, so what's the good?"

"Nay, out with it. I know I'm inclined to champion my friends, but I should not, you may be sure, if I had not the fullest confidence in them."

"That is 'plain for all men to see,' and you will be annoyed if I speak out, but I'll risk that, for your wrath will soon blow over. My thoughts come to this: I am not sure there is not something wrong about those diamonds."

"Wrong? How could there possibly be?"

"I haven't analyzed the thing clearly yet. Have you examined the stones carefully since you got them back?"

"To tell the truth, I never thought of it; only just opened the case and laid them in the cabinet as quickly and quietly as possible. But what could have happened to them? Mrs. Walcot only left here on Saturday, and the diamonds were back on Monday. What could have gone wrong in that time?"

"Nothing in that time, certainly, but—"

"But what?"

"Don't be hasty. I was thinking—. By the way, have those stones been seen by an expert jeweler lately?"

"Yes, not two months ago. Some fastening had come loose when we were up in London and my mother took them to Roskell's. I was with her and remember what the man said of them."

"I'll ask one thing of you then. Let us have those diamonds examined. If there is anything wrong it is full time you should know. If they are all right you will have a legitimate crow over me, and you may crow as loud as ever you like."

I still felt provoked with Marton, but here was a chance, indeed a certainty, of proving his suspicions unfounded and showing that even the astute Marton was not infallible, so I assented more readily than I should otherwise have done.

"All right, but how are we to get them away to be looked at without my mother knowing?"

"Bring a man over from Penrith or Carlisle when Mrs. Eaton is out, and ostensibly for some other purpose."

And this is what was done. The man for whom I sent had more knowledge, as I knew, than most local jewelers, and was safe. He came the next afternoon, and while my mother was paying a call examined the parure with Marton and myself. To my unutterable confusion and horror he pronounced the stones no stones at all, but paste, and not very good paste either.

V.

Marton did not laugh now; he was too much concerned about my obvious distress and annoyance. To find one's idols so utterly shattered was a stunning blow; but I had to arouse myself, for there were others to be considered. What on earth was to be done? The original stones were worth many thousands of pounds. I did not like that loss, but the prospect of my mother's trouble when the truth became known vexed me infinitely more.

"Anyhow," said Marton at last, "let us keep it quiet for the present. I have no doubt Mr. Rawsthorne will say nothing about it to any one."

Rawsthorne, whom we had known for years, promised silence, and I am sure he kept his promise. After he had gone Marton said:

"I don't know exactly what made me suspicious except the conviction that I've seen that woman before, and in connection with something that wasn't straight. You said there wasn't time to get those stones changed between Saturday, the day Mrs. Walcot left Earnshaw, and the Monday when you got them back. But how if it wasn't Mrs. Walcot at all who took them on the Saturday, but he on the—which day did he go? Wednesday?"

"No, on Thursday by an early train."

"Well, if he took them on the Thursday he could get them changed by the Saturday night. No doubt he had the false ones ready or somewhere within easy reach—Birmingham most likely. He posted them, you said, in Leamington?"

"But how could they have got the diamonds?" I made one more struggle in my unwillingness to believe. "I don't think that they were out of our sight at all, except, perhaps, when dressing for dinner, and at that time my mother would herself be dressing in the next room with the intervening door open; and when they went to bed."

"Ah! were they in bed all night?" Your bedroom is next the boudoir; did you hear any one enter or any noise?"

"Nothing; I slept soundly—by the way, yes, but I did. I heard that wretched Venus snuffing about, and told Mrs. Walcot in the morning that Venus was not much to depend on for a guardian, the creature rambled about so."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing that I remember."

"Be sure he got hold of them then and took the dog either to give warning or to afford an excuse, if he were found at that side of the house, by saying the dog had slipped out and he had followed to find her. A pretty piece of work you will have to get them back. If you go at him straight he will declare the stones are as his wife brought them, and that you are not acting as a gentleman should—that is where he will have you—in suggesting that they have changed them. So often husbands have sold their wives' diamonds and substituted paste that he can easily insinuate you have had them changed yourself to spend on larks without the mater, your agent, your banker or any one being the wiser, and he will say you have taken advantage of what he told you as a trusted friend. He can make out a specious case, and a man of that stamp can invent other fictions hardly less annoying. Mrs. Walcot stayed alone with you, I think you said, from the Thursday till the Saturday. I suppose you don't mind spending a hundred or two over the business if you can only recover them?"

"Certainly, and twice as much for the thing never to have happened. I can hardly persuade myself even now that they could be guilty of such knavery."

Marton said no more, but laid hold of a Bradshaw and dispatched a telegram, the reply to which gave a plausible excuse for his going off the next morning, and since I was too uncomfortable to rest quietly at home I said I would go with him for three or four days.

But there was another thing to be done. Take the trinkets with us we must, yet we could not take them without my mother's knowledge. Marton's readiness and decision solved the difficulty. He asked me to show him the jewels. He then deliberately snapped a bit of the setting so that two of the stones were loosened. I stared in amazement, but he simply said, "Wait," and put the case back in the cabinet. After dinner, as it was a rainy evening, Marton made as though he wanted to be amused and asked my mother like a spoiled child to be allowed to look at her diamonds for a treat. She was rather surprised at such frivolity on the part of the sedate and stern Marton, but of course had them brought. As soon as the case was opened and she became aware of the accident my mother was loud in her lamentations, and had no thought about anything except how the misfortune had happened and what was to be done, but she was somewhat pacified when Marton suggested that we should take the set up to town in the morning and get the mischief remedied. I wish I had that man's promptitude and nerve.

The next night saw us in close conference with a detective—I hate those crawling creatures, but there was no choice—and we reviewed the situation. Where were the Walcots? Since they would doubtless brazen it out if directly challenged they would not be specially anxious to conceal their whereabouts. They had spoken of returning to Mrs. Christie's for a couple of days and then visiting some friends before going over to Paris, so Mrs. Christie would probably be able to inform us where they were. Had they the stones with them? We guessed so, and that these stones were to be disposed of across the channel. So no time was to be lost. If they once went beyond seas, good-bye to our chance of recovering them. How on earth were they ever to be got hold of?

VI.

(Letter from Mr. John Dene.)

KEMPSTON, June 18, 1886.—Sir: On leaving you after receiving your instructions I started for this place, the nearest station to Lythe Court. There was likely to be considerable difficulty in getting a foothold at the court, but I decided to make my approaches as a groom changing his place and taking a few days' holiday in the neighborhood, having lived as a boy at Newmarket and knowing considerable about horses. Not to take up too much time in the telling, I may say I was soon at home there and made free of the servants' hall, where, by means of a civil tongue with the upper servants and a chirrupy manner with the maids, being also able to sing a lively song if called upon, I became friendly with the lot, so could consider who was likely to be useful and learn the ways of the visitors. I found Mrs. Walcot didn't have no maid with her; the housekeeper's niece, who was visiting her aunt, ladies' maided her, but she was no good, nervous, and no spirit about her. There was a middling lot of servants, what with the visitors, but at last I fixed on one, sir, as you might not think. She was an Indian woman, a nurse, ayah they call them, to the nieces of the mistress, Mrs. Hamilton, as had come from India in the spring. She was uncommon dark, rather small, but had a firmish look about her mouth, and her beady black eyes missed nothing. I guessed she would not stick at trifles, and would know as well as most our common language, which was pounds, shillings and pence, and it seemed best to lubricate the machinery freely. When we had come to an understanding how I wanted something done particularly quiet, I told her who I was and what I was after, and how this couple was supposed to be in possession of the stones known to have been changed. I wanted her to find out if they had the stones with them, and if so to get them into her hands, changing them if possible for the false ones, but anyhow getting the real ones. And I promised a sovereign down on the nail for every stone, big or little, and there was known to be 157. You should have seen her eyes glisten when I told her how much it was in their money, rupees, and when I showed her the bag of shiners. I proposed we should pretend to be keeping company, and then we should have nothing to bother us but the others' chaff. She caught on directly.

That same night she told me in the shrubbery she had discovered that Mrs. Walcot dressed early for dinner, and always locked her trunks before coming down and carried the keys in her pocket; the little dog Venus slept in their room; they locked the room door regularly every night, and there was a small revolver in her dressing bag.

The first supposition was that the stones, if they had them at all, were in their trunks. This I much doubted; still, the search had to be made, and to do this either the locks must be picked or Mrs. Walcot's keys be got hold of. The former alternative seemed harder, as the locks would probably be well made, but it would take less time than waiting to secure the keys, and time was an object. Accordingly I put into the ayah's hands a bunch of skeleton keys to try her luck with the locks, and if they offered no resistance to overhaul the trunks that night while they were at dinner. This venture was successful in one way, but not in another. The woman's skillful fingers mastered the locks, but there were no diamonds. "Plenty of pretty things," she said, "but no diamonds." She had the wit to see if the trunks had any secret receptacle. I told her to examine the high heels of her shoes, the thick ivory hair brushes and all coils of hair, but it was no use.

Then he or she carried them about? Which? She for choice, because if found on her it could be attributed to her kleptomania, which wouldn't apply to him. Besides, the complications of a woman's dress afford hiding places which the secretiveness of her character delights in.

Concluding then that she had them about her, we had these difficulties to counteract:

1. The presence of her husband.
2. The little dog.
3. The locked door.
4. The revolver.
5. Finding the whereabouts of the stones.
6. Getting them.

An hour's quiet walk in the lanes settled my plans. I concluded that the business must be done at night if it was to be done without resorting to violent measures, and

1. The husband must be got away for one night.
2. Venus must be dosed with a soporific (and her mistress, too, if necessary.)
3. I knew how to overcome this.
4. The mechanism must be disarranged or the cartridges damped.

5 and 6. Depended on the skill and nerve of the ayah.

And the steps I decided to take with regard to each particular were these:

1. To get the husband off the grounds he must be summoned away elsewhitherto by a telegram, but from whom so that he would believe it genuine and act on it? I set Safiyah, that was her name, to watch the letter bag—not that he was very likely to intrust anything important to that, which any one might see—and then strolled down to pick up what scraps of information I could by hook or crook at the postoffice. And here I had a fine piece of luck. As I entered the office whom should I see but Mr. Walcot himself just handing in a telegram. "What's this name? Barrett, is it?" asked the official. "Yes, it's plain enough," was the reply in a sharp tone of annoyance. "B-a-r-r-e double t," slowly spelled the unmoved operator, "and are these letters E. C.?" "Yes. Can't you read?" replied Mr. Walcot very rathfully. "E. C." repeated the man in the same monotonous way as before. "Affix the stamp, please." This was the last straw. "— you," said my gentleman, and quitted the office, slamming the door; the telegraph man had to lick the stamps himself; that wasn't my business, though I'd have licked a hundred stamps for the information I had got. Returning at once to my rooms, I wrote to a friend I often work with to send this message without fail the next day from some office in the E. C. district: "To Walcot, Lythe Court, Kempson. Meet me at the Grand 10 to-night. Barrett." And also I asked him to dispatch this at 9:30 next night: "Walcot, Grand Hotel, Trafalgar Square. Had to go suddenly. Paris. Barrett."

I should thus get Walcot away and too late for him to return that night; he would come back next day without having his suspicions unduly aroused, and without hunting up Barrett, whoever he was, supposing him off in France. I guessed he would take the bait, because he seemed so riled at one hearing Barrett's name in the telegraph office. I warned my co-operator by wire to expect an important letter.

2. Half a dozen drops of laudanum in a bit of chicken at 8 p. m. would settle Venus comfortable for the night, and two or three in madame's cocoatina would be just enough to make her sleep rather heavily.

3. I told the ayah to bring me the key of the bedroom door at 7:45, when the guests would have sat down to dinner. I had dealt with such before. Every key of this kind has a solid stem ending in a knob or boss, which stands outermost in the locked door; with a narrow flat file I divided this boss vertically in a slit an eighth of an inch deep, making it like a screw. By inserting a small screwdriver or broken penkife in the slit it was possible to make the key revolve and open the door; in the same way the bolt might be shot back again and the door relocked, and apparently all be just as before. Of course, the lock should be oiled so as to work easily. Most people think it safer to leave the key in the lock, but this is no good if the key has been filed like this one I held, and it never occurred to Madame Walcot to examine hers.

4. With a hypodermic syringe which Safiyah hunted up—it belonged to one of the fine ladies—I injected a few drops of water through the paper sheath of each cartridge the revolver held. They were safe enough now.

All these points were duly dealt with; in the first only did we risk much, but our chances were as good as the enemy's, and as yet the enemy were unsuspecting.

As five and six did not depend on me, I could only wait; but relied on the ayah; there was a look about her slender brown fingers that reminded me of wonderful tales of Indian jugglery. I wanted her to take some chloroform in case of accident, but she despised this.

Next morning, soon after sunrise, she met me in our usual walk in the shrubbery with a calm face, but in reply to my inquiry "What luck?" unfastened her headgear and poured into my hat what looked in the bright early sunshine like a shower of sparkling dewdrops. I said not a word till I had counted out into her hands 157 sovereigns; and when she had stowed them away I asked for the history of her adventure. This she told me at length, but I don't give it here, for she has to take the children to London to-morrow to meet some other relations, and as she will stay at the "Arundel" on the Embankment, no great way from the Temple, I thought you, sir, might like to see her yourself and hear her tale from her own lips.

She had hardly ended when we heard a window open above, and, peeping up through the screen leaves, saw the face of Mrs. Walcot, looking bright and fresh in the early morning light. I'm a hard man, but still I could not help feeling sorry for her, deceiver though she was, when I thought how much on the wrong side of the balance her accounts were likely to make up.

I shall return by the midday express and bring the diamonds to your chambers in the afternoon. I am, sir, your obedient servant, JOHN DENE.

Sidney Marton, Esq., Temple, London.

P. S.—We were only just in time. I heard at the Court this forenoon, where I strolled so as not to seem to leave hurriedly, that Mr. Walcot was coming down by midday, and they are off to Paris on Friday. J. D.

VII.

"Well," said Marton, as he folded up Dene's report, "I suppose that is about the end of the business, except interviewing the man and getting the diamonds; it is to be hoped that the supple-fingered Indian hasn't tricked Dene after all, and kept the genuine articles herself. By the way, I should rather like to hear what that woman has to tell us. Step down with me to the Arundel and we will try to find her."

I did not much care to hear anything more about the abominable business; but as Marton seemed to wish it, and I was indebted to him in the matter, I smothered my disinclination and went.

Safiyah was not hard to find, and this is the tale she told us:

"As soon as I heard the gentlemen disperse from the smoking room and the house at last began to be still I crept down stairs and quietly sat down in the window seat at the southern angle of the corridor. I had taken care to open the casement before, and the night was perfectly calm, so that I could catch whatever sounds came from Mrs. Walcot's rooms, as they were reached from the opposite wall; I heard her talk to her dog Venus, 'Poor dear creature, what makes it so sleepy?' (I could have told her); I heard her open and shut with a click her traveling bag, and soon followed another hard metallic sound, which I guessed came from laying the revolver on the little marble table by the bedside; I heard the clinking of the spoon in her cup of cocoatina, then the sound of the cup and saucer set down; then ten minutes of shuffling, then a long yawn—of which I was glad, for it meant drowsiness—the light went out; but at this time of year there is a dim luster clear enough to see by all night. Soon all was still. I waited there a full hour, that her sleep might be settled and deep. Next I looked to see that all the doors in the corridor were closed, so that there might be no draught to shut any of them with an awakening bang, though as the night was calm there was little chance of that; still, it was well to be on the safe side. Then with the small screwdriver Mr. Dene gave me I softly turned the key, pushing back against the spring, but not relaxing my hold after the resistance was overcome, so that there was no sound; then I turned the handle, and as this, like all at the Court, was well fitted, it made no noise; inch by inch I opened the door, and at last I stood inside; I had nothing with me but the bag containing the false stones, a delicate feather, and my own skill and courage.

"I stood and considered. I could see a little and hear more; the dog was breathing heavily in her basket near the marble table. Mrs. Walcot had her face turned the other way, and was fast asleep. Then I slipped silently round the bed and observed the sleeper. One hand lay outside the coverlet, the other was placed beneath her cheek and parted lips, but whether it held anything could not be seen, nor, as she then lay, could I pass my hand beneath the pillow. And now began my task. You have heard of the Indian thieves, and how by making a sleeper toss about restlessly they can steal away the very bedclothes on which he is lying. All this I knew, and many another trick of hand cunning.

"And now, one slightest touch of the tiny feather, she moved her head; another touch, her hand stirred; a third, her head turns half round, and held loosely in her fingers appears in the shadowy twilight a small leathern bag. Now for the test of delicate skill; hardly a brush, hardly more than a fanning of the surface of those slender fingers and the hold relaxes; I touch the bag, the treasure is mine—no, not yet—the hand slowly begins to close again. Shall I snatch the prize? No; such roughness is only for clumsy hands; let be a while; yet one more subtle stirring of that satin skin, the faintest ruffle; her hand once more uncloses, and remains unclosed. Softly I grasped the bag, untying the thick cord of silk and burying it in my pocket, where the diamonds make no sound as they fall; then withdrawing my hand I unfasten the other bag and insert it in the neck of hers, smothering the two in my shawl, as I reverse their position, to drown the noise of the moving stones. And now it is done, the silken band is tied again—still she sleeps peacefully—and lastly I replace the bag near her hand as it was before. Was it a part of my natural cruelty or the pride of a triumphant skill that made me yet once more touch her hand, which, as it opened and reclosed, again grasped the bag, to complete the unhappy woman's deception? All over now save an easy retreat; one look around to see that no traces are left; softly I open the door, softly pass through, softly close it again. I go down the stairs and pass out into the cool night air, where I walked into the shrubbery until Mr. Dene came, and I gave him the real diamonds. Ah, Sahibs," she added, "you are our masters, but you have a great deal to learn from us."

VIII.

But I had an experience yet to come. The next morning Marton and I decided to finish the business by taking the stones, with the settings, to be replaced; and when that was done I vowed I would make my mother keep them in a safe; indeed, I had written the night before to Gaskell, the agent, to order one suitable for the wall in my mother's boudoir. We were just turning into the jeweler's when—good heavens!—whom should we meet face to face but—the Walcots! I stammered out something, and felt hot all over and utterly miserable, hardly knowing whether I was standing on my heels or my head; and they did not seem much more at their ease—at least Marton said so afterwards. He was calm and imperturbable, and never, he said, enjoyed a scene so much in his life, though the actors played their parts in a manner that was beneath contempt. At last after some of the tritest and most trivial remarks we got disentangled, and managed to say "Good day." It was natural to me to be awkard at a crisis, but they were people of the world; presently, however, we found what it was that had disconcerted them. We were just unfolding our business to the jeweler, the same man who had so greatly admired these stones a few months before; he remarked how much more fortunate we were in our possessions than the lady and gentleman who had just gone.

"How so?" asked Marton.

"They wished to dispose of some valuable diamonds, they said, and we were not unwilling to become the purchasers of really good stones; but when they untied the little leathern bag which contained them and poured them on the counter, I saw at a glance that they were not genuine stones, and told them so. He muttered, 'After all that trouble,' but she had not a word to utter; in fact, she seemed dazed and stupefied. Pray can you tell me, sir, who they are, if I may take the liberty; I think they spoke with you as you entered?"

"Their name is Walcot, and that is about all that I can tell you."

"And, Gerard," he said as we parted, "that was about enough; to any one who knew them it spoke volumes—aye, whole libraries—didn't it? Anyhow, I think we have been 'upsides' with them, as they say in your country, this time." And I thought so too.

—Belgravia.

OFFERINGS OF THE POETS.

Said the Rose.

I am weary of the garden,
Said the rose;
For the winter winds are sighing,
All my playmates round me dying,
And my leaves will soon be lying
'Neath the snows.

But I hear my mistress coming,
Said the rose;
She will take me to her chamber,
Where the honeysuckles clamber,
And I'll bloom there all December
Spite the snows.

Sweeter fell her lily fingers
Than the bee!
Ah, how feebly I resisted,
Smoothed my thorns, and e'en assisted
As all blushing I was twisted
Off my tree.

And she fixed me in her bosom
Like a star;
And I flashed there all the morning,
Jasmin, honeysuckle scorning,
Parasites forever fawning
That they are.

And when evening came she set me
In a vase
All of rare and radiant metal,
And I felt her red lips settle
On my leaves 'till each proud petal
Touched her face.

And I shone about her slumbers
Like a light;
And, I said, instead of weeping,
In the garden vigil keeping,
Here I'll watch my mistress sleeping
Every night.

But when morning with its sunbeams
Softly shone,
In the mirror where she braided
Her brown hair I saw how jaded,
Old and colorless and faded
I had grown.

Not a drop of dew was on me,
Never one;
From my leaves no odors started,
All my perfume had departed,
I lay pale and broken-hearted
In the sun.

Still, I said, her smile is better
Than the rain;
Though my fragrance may forsake me,
To her bosom she will take me.
And with crimson tissues make me
Young again.

So she took me—gazed a second—
Half a sigh—
Then, alas, can hearts so harden?
Without ever asking pardon,
Threw me back into the garden,
There to die.

How the jealous garden gloried
In my fall!
How the honeysuckles chid me,
How the sneering jasmins bid me
Light the long gray grass that hid me
Like a pall.

There I lay beneath her window
In a swoon,
Till the earthworm o'er me trailing
Woke me just at twilight's failing,
As the whip-poor-will was wailing
To the moon.

But I hear the storm-winds stirring
In their lair;
And I know they soon will life me
In their giant arms and sift me
Into ashes as they drift me
Through the air.

So I pray them in their mercy
Just to take
From my heart of hearts or near it
The last living leaf and bear it
To her feet and bid her wear it
For my sake.

—George H. Miles.

A Prayer.

Thank God for life.
Even though it brings much bitterness and strife
And all our fairest dreams are wrecked and lost,
Even though there is more ill than good in life,
We cling to life and reckon not the cost.
Thank God for life.

Thank God for love,
For, though sometimes grief follows in its wake,
Still we forget love's sorrow in love's joy
And cherish tears with smiles for love's sweet sake—
Only in heaven is bliss without alloy.
Thank God for love.

Thank God for pain.
No tear hath ever yet been shed in vain,
And in the end each sorrowing heart shall find
No curse, but blessings, in the hand of pain.
Even when he smiteth, then God is most kind.
Thank God for pain.

Thank God for death,
Who touches anguished lips and stills the breath
And bringeth peace unto each troubled breast
From which all grief hath flown? Oh, blessed death!
God's sweetest gift! The name in heaven is rest!
Thank God for death.

—Marie Joussaye.

An Interlude.

A tender silence fell between the songs,
And then the frail voice of a violin
Made mellow music; such we dream belongs
To fair white spirits free from soil or sin.

A delicate delight filled all the air,
And still the mystic cadence rose and fell,
Making its plant of sorrow none could share,
Telling sweet stories words could never tell.

There was a hidden sadness in its mirth,
And underneath the sadness radiant joy;
Dim visions dawned of some new, glorious earth,
Unstained and perfect, gold without alloy.

The notes dropped lower, like the shy caress
Of one who little knows yet greatly dares.
Love trembled o'er the strings, faint with that stress
Of strong desire, whose hopes are pleading prayers.

So sank the music to its sighing close;
The wond'rous voice left half a heaven untold.
Only an interlude! Yet often white rose
Wears grace more royal than the sunflower's gold.

—The Queen.

Sing Again.

You sang me a song,
'Twas the close of the year.
Sing again!
I cannot remember the name
Or the words.
'Tis the same
We listen to hear
When the windows are open in spring
And the air's full of birds.
One calls from the branch some sweet thing,
And one sings on the wing
The refrain.

You sang me a song,
My heart thrilled to hear.
The refrain
Has run like a fillet of gold
Through the woof
Of the cold
Dark days of a year.
To-night there's a year at its start,
All the birds are aloof.
Your eyes hold the sun for my part,
And the spring's in your heart.
Sing again!

—M. L. Van Vorst, in Scribner's.

Yet Love Can Last.

Yet love can last, yet love can last,
The future be as was the past,
And faith and fondness never know
The chill of dwindling afterglow,
If to familiar hearth there cling
The virgin freshness of the spring,
And April's music still be heard
In wooing voice and winning word.

If when autumnal shadows streak
The furrowed brow, the wrinkled cheek,
Devotion, deepening to the close,
Like fruit that ripens tenderer grows;
If, though the leaves of youth and hope,
Lie thick on life's declining slope,
The fond heart, faithful to the last,
Lingers in love drifts of the past;
If with the gravely shortening days
Faith trims the lamp, faith feeds the blaze,
And reverence, robed in wintry white,
Sheds fragrance like a summer night,
Then love can last!

—Alfred Austin.

Shadow March.

All around the house is the jet black night;
It stares through the window pane;
It crawls in the corners, hiding from the light,
And it moves with the moving flame.

Now my little heart goes a-beating like a drum,
With the breath of the Bogie in my hair;
And all round the candle the crooked shadows come
And go marching along up the stair.

The shadows of the balusters, the shadow of the lamp,
The shadow of the child that goes to bed—
All the wicked shadows coming, tramp, tramp, tramp,
With the black night overhead.

—From "A Child's Garden of Verses," by Robert Louis Stevenson.

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