

VAN TWILLER DIAMONDS

(Continued from page 10)

aware that he had come upon dangerous ground, in his warmth. "This business is not so black as you are driven to suppose—that's all."

"So you realize it looks rather black? By George! what molasses to sweeten it over! Sugar-coated burglary, or treachery, or both!" cried Van Twiller. "Is this the sum total you can give me for your argument, your defense, after all this time to think it up?"

Wooster revolved a score of replies, none of which could avail. After a moment he answered: "What more do you expect me to say?"

The Major eyed him hotly. That he struggled to restrain a rising temper Wooster plainly saw.

"I expect something manly, at least," he said as calmly as he might. "See here, young man, you ought to be in jail already. Anybody knows as much as that, after what I caught you doing here. I gave you a chance—in a way as your own father might have done. But, by George! you, or my son, or any other man—I'd see the law upheld! I'll put this through! I've got that detective here in the house to take you at a moment's notice."

"Now, sir, I ask you, as man to man, to say something. Clear yourself, if you can! If you opened my safe for some one else, uncover the hound!—give him up, like a decent citizen! If you know I've got an enemy, tell me his name! Let me fight him face to face! I shall despise you if you've been a low-down tool and dupe; but by heavens, I'll send you straight to prison if you opened that safe on your own account. Now, sir, why did you do it?"

Wooster had not even hazarded a guess that Aileen was behind the curtain again to-night. He thought first of her, however, as the one to protect. Driven to bay by the fierce old soldier's demand—half appeal, half a proffered loophole of escape—he was wholly at a loss for an answer. In lieu of anything better, anything nearer to the truth, and yet of no apparent significance, he looked at the Major and said haltingly: "I—did it because—I wish to marry."

Major Van Twiller seemed not at first to understand, or to believe this statement. There was a certain baldness and incongruity about it that puzzled him.

"Because you wish to get married?" he repeated. "Do you mean your intention was to take something—say that diamond necklace—to aid yourself, or to do something toward a marriage?"

"No," said Wooster, "I mean nothing of the sort."

"Then what did you mean? Blazes! You are past praying for! Who is the woman, sir? I shall warn her of what you are! Tell me who she is!"

"That is out of the question," Wooster answered in some confusion.

"You refuse to divulge her name?"

"Certainly."

"And you opened my safe to promote this marriage—in some way or other? Well, sir, I am done with you—done!" said the Major, in a calm that betokened the worst for all concerned. "I'll give you your remaining chances to tell something further to a court and jury! Ring that bell for the man. Never mind! I'll do it myself."

He was moving impatiently across the room to touch the button that would summon the visiting detective, when an interruption came from an unexpected source. From the hall behind him issued a sound of joyous singing. A moment later Aileen came running in, flinging aside the curtain with girlish energy. Distraught as she really was, and nearly collapsing with fear and anxiety, yet she seemed the very incarnation of youthful happiness and gaiety.

"Oh!—why—you two!" she said in mock delight and surprise. "I just came in for a moment to use the 'phone. And

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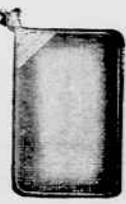
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—daddy—I want you to listen carefully and indulgently to what I'm going to say."

She ran lightly to the telephone, her acting a thing of perfection. With palpitating heart and quivering knees, she took the receiver from the hook and asked for a number.

"Now listen, daddie, and get ready to be very kind and good," she coaxed engagingly. Then, after a few preliminary queries: "Is that 2242, J? What?—yes—hello? Well, this is Miss Van Twiller. Is Miss Seabright at home? Oh, is that you, Millie? I didn't know your voice. I want to tell you something before I tell anyone else in the world, because you're my dearest friend. I hear you're to leave town in a day or so, and I may not see you in time. You know the society reporters of the—of the important papers, don't you?" She was silent for a space, listening, her bosom heaving with suppressed excitement.

Wooster stood with his hand on the table, his face exceedingly pale. His gaze was apparently fixed on the floor. The Major had halted, on his way to ring the bell. He twisted his long mustache fiercely.

"Yes—yes," said Aileen at the 'phone. "Do come and see me as soon as you return—do. But I called you up to get you to make an announcement for me—the announcement of my engagement to—Mr. Nelson Wooster—Nelson. What's that?—hello! Yes, Mr. Nelson Wooster—you know. Yes, Oh, thank you. We—we feel sure we'll be very happy. Thank you again. Yes, you're to tell anyone you please. Yes. Good-by, dear."

For a moment Major Van Twiller stared at Wooster ferociously. In astonishment himself, Nelson looked up and caught his glance.

They heard the click as Aileen hung up the receiver. She hesitated for a second, in which to nerve herself anew. Then she turned about, all smiles and radiance, and came running toward her father. "There, daddy—there!" she cried. "That's news, and you'll like it, I know. And now—we want your blessing!"

The Major made a spasmodic effort to control himself; but his rage, at this sudden and unexpected complication of affairs, was as fierce as was his surprise. Thus to learn that Wooster was engaged to marry his daughter made him furious. That Aileen had given the news to the world simply added fuel to his passion. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, only partially restraining his emotions.

Aileen became as white as milk. "Why—didn't you—hear?" she faltered, her powers of acting almost shattered. "Daddy—don't you wish me to be happy?—to have this happiness?"

Her father loved her almost to fanaticism. She had swayed his moods, quelled his temper and had her own way from the days of her helpless babyhood. He could not bear to wound her now, and yet his anger was consuming all else within him.

"My daughter—you!" he blurted fiercely. Once again he gripped himself, to gain the mastery over his hotter emotions. "When did this happen?" he asked.

In a flash of intuition Aileen was aware that his question was a trap to entangle Nelson. She knew her father believed the engagement to have taken place since Nelson's apparent disgrace—that he believed it a further perfidy on Nelson's part. Swiftly she moved between her father and her fiancé. She, and not Nelson, was the one to answer the Major's question.

"Why—it was sometime ago," she said, dissembling with the best vestiges of her womanly art and courage. "We wanted to keep it as our own little secret—at the time. Have we done anything wrong? I thought it would make you as happy as it's making me."

"It—it surprises me! I'm busy! I was talking business with—Nelson!" said her father in a half-apologetic tone. "I