

The Episode Of The Diamond Links

GRANT ALLEN

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"LET us take a trip to Switzerland," said Lady Vandrift. And anyone who knows Amelia will not be surprised to learn that we did take a trip to Switzerland accordingly. Nobody can drive Sir Charles except his wife. And nobody at all can drive Amelia.

There were difficulties at the outset, because we had not ordered rooms at the hotels beforehand, and it was well on in the season; but they were overcome at last by the usual application of a golden key; and we found ourselves in due time pleasantly quartered in Lucerne, at that most comfortable of European hostleries, the Schweitzerhof.

We were a square party of four – Sir Charles and Amelia, myself and Isabel. We had nice big rooms, on the first floor overlooking the lake, and as none of us was possessed with the faintest symptom of that incipient mania which shows itself in the form of an insane desire to climb mountain heights of disagreeable steepness and unnecessary snowiness, I will venture to assert we all enjoyed ourselves. We spent most of our time sensibly in lounging about the lake on the jolly little steamers; and when we did a mountain climb, it was on the Rigi or Pilatus where an engine undertook all the muscular work for us.

As usual, at the hotel, a great many miscellaneous people showed a burning desire to be specially nice to us. If you wish to see how friendly and charming humanity is, just try being a well-known millionaire for a week; and you'll learn a thing or two. Wherever Sir Charles goes, he is surrounded by charming and disinterested people, all eager to make his distinguished acquaintance, and all familiar with several excellent investment or several deserving objects of Christian charity. It is my business in life, as his brother-in-law and secretary, to decline with thanks the excellent investments, and to throw judicious cold water on the objects of charity. Even I myself, as the great man's almoner, am very much sought after. People casually allude before me to artless stories of "poor curates in Cumberland, you know, Mr. Wentworth," or widows in Cornwall, penniless poets with epics in their desks, and young painters who need but the breath of a patron to open to them the doors of an admiring Academy. I smile and look wise while I administer cold water in minute doses; but I never report one of these cases to Sir Charles, except in the rare or almost unheard-of event where I think there is really something in them.

Ever since our little adventure with the Seer at Nice, Sir Charles, who is constitutionally cautious, had been even more careful than usual about possible sharpers. And, as chance would have it, there sat just opposite us at the table d'hote at the Schweitzerhof – 'tis a fad of Amelia's to dine at table d'hote; she says she can't bear to be boxed up all day in private rooms with "too much family" – a sinister-looking man with dark hair and eyes, conspicuous by his bushy, overhanging eyebrows. My attention was first called to the eyebrows in question by a nice little parson who sat at our side, and who observed that they were made up of certain large and bristly hairs, which (he told us) had been traced by Darwin to our monkey ancestors. Very pleasant little fellow, this fresh-faced young parson, on his honeymoon tour with a nice wee wife, a bonnie Scotch lassie with a charming accent.

I looked at the eyebrows close. Then a sudden thought struck me. "Do you believe they're his own?" I asked of the curate; "or are they only stuck on – a make-up disguise? They really almost look like it."

"You don't suppose – " Charles began, and checked himself suddenly.

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"Yes, I do," I answered; "the Seer!" Then I recollected my blunder, and looked down sheepishly. For, to say the truth, Vandrift had straightly enjoined on me long before to say nothing of our painful little episode at Nice to Amelia; he was afraid if she once heard of it, he would hear of it for ever after.

"What Seer?" the little parson inquired, with parsonical curiosity.

I noticed the man with the overhanging eyebrows give a queer sort of start. Charles's glance was fixed upon me. I hardly knew what to answer.

"Oh, a man who was at Nice with us last year," I stammered out, trying hard to look unconcerned. "A fellow they talked about, that's all." And I turned the subject.

But the curate, like a donkey, wouldn't let me turn it.

"Had he eyebrows like that?" he inquired, in an undertone. I was really angry. If this WAS Colonel Clay, the curate was obviously giving him the cue, and making it much more difficult for us to catch him, now we might possibly have lighted on the chance of doing so.

"No, he hadn't," I answered, testily; "it was a passing expression. But this is not the man. I was mistaken, no doubt." And I nudged him gently.

The little curate was too innocent for anything. "Oh, I see," he replied, nodding hard and looking wise. Then he turned to his wife, and made an obvious face, which the man with the eyebrows couldn't fail to notice.

Fortunately, a political discussion going on a few places further don the table spread up to us and diverted attention for a moment. The magical name of Gladstone saved us. Sir Charles flared up. I was truly pleased, for I could see Amelia was boiling over with curiosity by this time.

After dinner, in the billiard-room, however, the man with the big eyebrows sidled up and began to talk to me. If he was Colonel Clay, it was evident he bore us no grudge at all for the five thousand pounds he had done us out of. On the contrary, he seemed quite prepared to do us out of five thousand more when opportunity offered; for he introduced himself at once as Dr. Hector Macpherson, the exclusive grantee of extensive concessions from the Brazilian Government on the Upper Amazons. He dived into conversation with me at once as to the splendid mineral resources of his Brazilian estate – the silver, the platinum, the actual rubies, the possible diamonds. I listened and smiled; I knew what was coming. All he needed to develop this magnificent concession was a little more capital. It was sad to see thousands of pounds' worth of platinum and car-loads of rubies just crumbling in the soil or carried away by the river, for want of a few hundreds to work them with properly. If he knew of anybody, now, with money to invest, he could recommend him – nay, offer him – a unique opportunity of earning, say, 40 per cent on his capital, on unimpeachable security.

"I wouldn't do it for every man," Dr. Hector Macpherson remarked, drawing himself up; "but if I took a fancy to a fellow who had command of ready cash, I might choose to put him in the way of feathering his nest with unexampled rapidity."

"Exceedingly disinterested of you," I answered, drily, fixing my eyes on his eyebrows.

The little curate, meanwhile, was playing billiards with Sir Charles. His glance followed mine as it rested for a moment on the monkey-like hairs.

"False, obviously false," he remarked with his lips; and I'm bound to confess I never saw any man speak so well by movement alone; you could follow every word, though not a sound escaped him.

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During the rest of that evening, Dr. Hector Macpherson stuck to me as close as a mustard-plaster. And he was almost as irritating. I got heartily sick of the Upper Amazons. I have positively waded in my time through ruby mines (in prospectuses, I mean) till the mere sight of a ruby absolutely sickens me. When Charles, in an unwonted fit of generosity, once gave his sister Isabel (whom I had the honour to marry) a ruby necklet (inferior stones), I made Isabel change it for sapphires and amethysts, on the judicious plea that they suited her complexion better. (I scored one, incidentally, for having considered Isabel's complexion.) By the time I went to bed I was prepared to sink the Upper Amazons in the sea, and to stab, shoot, poison, or otherwise seriously damage the man with the concession and the false eyebrows.

For the next three days, at intervals, he returned to the charge. He bored me to death with his platinum and his rubies. He didn't want a capitalist who would personally exploit the thing; he would prefer to do it all on his own account, giving the capitalist preference debentures of his bogus company and a lien on the concession. I listened and smiled; I listened and yawned; I listened and was rude; I ceased to listen at all; but still, he droned on with it. I fell asleep on the steamer one day, and woke up in ten minutes to hear him droning yet: "And the yield of platinum per ton was certified to be – " I forget how many pounds, or ounces, or pennyweights. These details of assays have ceased to interest me; like the man who "didn't believe in ghosts," I have seen too many of them.

The fresh-faced little curate and his wife however, were quite different people. He was a cricketing Oxford man; she was a breezy Scotch lass, with a wholesome breath of the Highlands about her. I called her "White Heather." Their name was Brabazon. Millionaires are so accustomed to being beset by harpies of every description, that when they come across a young couple who are simple and natural, they delight in the purely human relation. We picnicked and went excursions a great deal with the honeymooners. They were so frank in their young love, and so proof against chaff, that we all really liked them. But whenever I called the pretty girl "White Heather," she looked so shocked, and cried: "Oh, Mr. Wentworth!" Still, we were the best of friends. The curate offered to row us in a boat on the lake one day, while the Scotch lassie assured us she could take an oar almost as well as he did. However, we did not accept their offer, as row-boats exert an unfavourable influence upon Amelia's digestive organs.

"Nice young fellow, that man Brabazon," Sir Charles said to me one day, as we lounged together along the quay; "never talks about advowsons or next presentations. Doesn't seem to me to care two pins about promotion. Says he's quite content in his country curacy; enough to live upon, and needs no more; and his wife has a little, a very little, money. I asked him about his poor today, on purpose to test him: these parsons are always trying to screw something out of one for their poor; men in my position know the truth of the saying that we have that class of the population always with us. Would you believe it, he says he hasn't any poor at all in his parish! They're all well-to-do farmers or else able-bodied labourers, and his one terror is that somebody will come and try to pauperize them. 'If a philanthropist were to give me fifty pounds to-day for use at Empingham,' he said, 'I assure you, Sir Charles, I shouldn't know what to do with it. I think I should buy new dresses for Jessie, who wants them about as much as anybody else in the village – that is to say, not at all.' There's a parson for you, Sey, my boy. Only wish we had one of his sort at Seldon."

"He certainly doesn't want to get anything out of you," I answered.

That evening at dinner, a queer little episode happened. The man with the eyebrows began talking to me across the table in his usual fashion, full of his wearisome concession on the Upper Amazons. I was trying to squash him as politely as possible, when I caught Amelia's eye. Her look amused me. She was engaged in making signals to Charles at her side to observe the little curate's curious sleeve-links. I glanced at them, and saw at once they were a singular possession for so unobtrusive a person. They consisted each of a short gold bar for one arm of the link, fastened by a tiny chain of the same material to what seemed to my tolerably experienced eye – first-rate diamond. Pretty big diamonds, too, and of remarkable shape, brilliancy, and cutting. In a moment, I knew what Amelia meant. She owned a diamond rivièrè, said to be of Indian origin, but short by two stones for the circumference of her tolerably ample neck.

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Now, she had long been wanting two diamonds like these to match her set, but owing to the unusual shape and antiquated cutting of her own gems, she had never been able to complete the necklet, at least without removing an extravagant amount from a much larger stone of the first water.

The Scotch lassie's eyes caught Amelia's at the same time, and she broke into a pretty smile of good-humoured amusement. "Taken in another person, Dick, dear!" she exclaimed, in her breezy way, turning to her husband. "Lady Vandrift is observing your diamond sleeve-links."

"They're very fine gems," Amelia observed, incautiously. (A most unwise admission, if she desired to buy them.)

But the pleasant little curate was too transparently simple a soul to take advantage of her slip of judgment. "They are good Stones," he replied; "very good stones – considering. They're not diamonds at all, to tell you the truth. They're best old-fashioned Oriental paste. My great-grandfather bought them, after the siege of Seringapatam, for a few rupees, from a Sepoy who had looted them from Tippoo Sultan's palace. He thought, like you, he had got a good thing. But it turned out, when they came to be examined by experts, they were only paste – very wonderful paste; it is supposed they had even imposed upon Tippoo himself, so fine is the imitation. But they are worth – well, say, fifty shillings at the utmost."

While he spoke, Charles looked at Amelia, and Amelia looked at Charles. Their eyes spoke volumes. The riviere was also supposed to have come from Tippoo's collection. Both drew at once an identical conclusion. These were two of the same stones, very likely torn apart and disengaged from the rest in the melee at the capture of the Indian palace.

"Can you take them off?" Sir Charles asked, blandly. He spoke in the tone that indicates business.

"Certainly," the little curate answered, smiling. "I'm accustomed to taking them off. They're always noticed. They've been kept in the family ever since the siege, as a sort of valueless heirloom, for the sake of the picturesqueness of the story, you know; and nobody ever sees them without asking, as you do, to examine them closely. They deceive even experts at first. But they're paste, all the same; unmitigated Oriental paste, for all that."

He took them both off, and handed them to Charles. No man in England is a finer judge of gems than my brother-in-law. I watched him narrowly. He examined them close, first with the naked eye, then with the little pocket-lens which he always carries. "Admirable imitation," he muttered, passing them on to Amelia. "I'm not surprised they should impose upon inexperienced observers."

But from the tone in which he said it, I could see at once he had satisfied himself they were real gems of unusual value. I know Charles's way of doing business so well. His glance to Amelia meant, "These are the very stones you have so long been in search of."

The Scotch lassie laughed a merry laugh. "He sees through them now, Dick," she cried. "I felt sure Sir Charles would be a judge of diamonds."

Amelia turned them over. I know Amelia, too; and I knew from the way Amelia looked at them that she meant to have them. And when Amelia means to have anything, people who stand in the way may just as well spare themselves the trouble of opposing her.

They were beautiful diamonds. We found out afterwards the little curate's account was quite correct: these stones had come from the same necklet as Amelia's riviere, made for a favourite wife of Tippoo's, who had presumably as expansive personal charms as our beloved sister-in-law's. More perfect diamonds have seldom been seen. They have excited the universal admiration of thieves and connoisseurs. Amelia told me afterwards that, according to legend, a Sepoy stole the necklet at the sack of the palace, and then fought with another for it. It was

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believed that two stones got spilt in the scuffle, and were picked up and sold by a third person – a looker-on – who had no idea of the value of his booty. Amelia had been hunting for them for several years, to complete her necklet.

"They are excellent paste," Sir Charles observed, handing them back. "It takes a first-rate judge to detect them from the reality. Lady Vandrift has a necklet much the same in character, but composed of genuine stones; and as these are so much like them, and would complete her set, to all outer appearance, I wouldn't mind giving you, say, 10 pounds for the pair of them."

Mrs. Brabazon looked delighted. "Oh, sell them to him, Dick," she cried, "and buy me a brooch with the money! A pair of common links would do for you just as well. Ten pounds for two paste stones! It's quite a lot of money."

She said it so sweetly, with her pretty Scotch accent that I couldn't imagine how Dick had the heart to refuse her. But he did, all the same.

"No, Jess, darling," he answered. "They're worthless, I know; but they have for me a certain sentimental value, as I've often told you. My dear mother wore them, while she lived, as earrings; and as soon as she died, I had them set as links in order that I might always keep them about me. Besides, they have historical and family interest. Even a worthless heirloom, after all, IS an heirloom."

Dr. Hector Macpherson looked across and intervened. "There is a part of my concession," he said, "where we have reason to believe a perfect new Kimberley will soon be discovered. If at any time you would care Sir Charles, to look at my diamonds – when I get them – it would afford me the greatest pleasure in life to submit them to your consideration."

Sir Charles could stand it no longer. "Sir," he said, gazing across at him with his sternest air, "if your concession were as full of diamonds as Sindbad the Sailor's alley, I would not care to turn my head to look at them. I am acquainted with the nature and practice of salting." And he glared at the man with the overhanging eyebrows as if he would devour him raw. Poor Dr. Hector Macpherson subsided instantly. We learnt a little later that he was a harmless lunatic who went about the world with successive concessions for ruby mines and platinum reefs because he had been ruined and driven mad by speculations in the two, and now recouped himself by imaginary grants in Burmah and Brazil, or anywhere else that turned up handy. And his eyebrows, after all, were of Nature's handicraft. We were sorry for the incident; but a man in Sir Charles's position is such a mark for rogues that, if he did not take means to protect himself promptly, he would be for ever overrun by them.

When we went up to our so that evening, Amelia flung herself on the sofa. "Charles," she broke out in the voice of a tragedy queen, "those are real diamonds, and I shall never be happy again till I get them."

"They are real diamonds," Charles echoed. "And you shall have them, Amelia. They're worth not less than three thousand pounds. But I shall bid them up gently."

So, next day, Charles set to work to higgler with the curate. Brabazon, however, didn't care to part with them. He was no money-grubber, he said. He cared more for his mother's gift and a family tradition than for a hundred pounds, if Sir Charles were to offer it. Charles's eye gleamed. "But if I give you TWO hundred!" he said, insinuatingly. "What opportunities for good! You could build a new wing to your village school-house!"

"We have ample accommodation," the curate answered. "No, I don't think I'll sell them."

Still, his voice faltered somewhat, and he looked down at them inquiringly.

Charles was too precipitate.

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"A hundred pounds more or less matters little to me," he said; "and my wife has set her heart on them. It's every man's duty to please his wife isn't it, Mrs. Brabazon? I offer you three hundred."

The little Scotch girl clasped her hands.

"Three hundred pounds! Oh, Dick, just think what fun we could have, and what good we could do with it! Do let him have them."

Her accent was irresistible. But the curate shook his head.

"Impossible," he answered. "My dear mother's earrings! Uncle Aubrey would be so angry if he knew I'd sold them. I daren't face Uncle Aubrey."

"Has he expectations from Uncle Aubrey?" Sir Charles asked of White Heather.

Mrs. Brabazon laughed. "Uncle Aubrey! Oh, dear, no. Poor dear old Uncle Aubrey! Why, the darling old soul hasn't a penny to bless himself with, except his pension. He's a retired post captain." And she laughed melodiously. She was a charming woman.

"Then I should disregard Uncle Aubrey's feelings," Sir Charles said, decisively.

"No, no," the curate answered. "Poor dear old Uncle Aubrey! I wouldn't do anything for the world to annoy him. And he'd be sure to notice it."

We went back to Amelia. "Well, have you got them?" she asked.

"No," Sir Charles answered. "Not yet. But he's coming round, I think. He's hesitating now. Would rather like to sell them himself, but is afraid that 'Uncle Aubrey' would say about the matter. His wife will talk him out of his needless consideration for Uncle Aubrey's feelings; and to-morrow we'll finally clench the bargain."

Next morning we stayed late in our salon, where we always breakfasted, and did not come down to the public rooms till just before dejeuner, Sir Charles being busy with me over arrears of correspondence. When we did come down, the concierge stepped forward with a twisted little feminine note for Amelia. She took it and read it. Her countenance fell. "There, Charles," she cried, handing it to him, "you've let the chance slip. I shall never be happy now! They've gone off with the diamonds."

Charles seized the note and read it. Then he passed it on to me. It was short, but final: – Thursday, 6 a.m.

"DEAR LADY VANDRIFT – WILL you kindly excuse our having gone off hurriedly without bidding you good-bye? We have just had a horrid telegram to say that Dick's favourite sister is dangerously ill of fever in Paris. I wanted to shake hands with you before we left – you have all been so sweet to us – but we go by the morning train, absurdly early, and I wouldn't for worlds disturb you. Perhaps some day we may meet again – though, buried as we are in a North-country village, it isn't likely; but in any case, you have secured the grateful recollection of Yours very cordially, JESSIE BRABAZON.

P.S. – Kindest regards to Sir Charles and those dear Wentworths, and a kiss for yourself, if I may venture to send you one."

"She doesn't even mention where they've gone," Amelia exclaimed, in a very bad humour.

"The concierge may know," Isabel suggested, looking over my shoulder.

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We asked at his office.

Yes, the gentleman's address was the Rev. Richard Peploe Brabazon, Holme Bush Cottage, Empingham, Northumberland.

Any address where letters might be sent at once, in Paris ?

For the next ten days, or till further notice, Hotel des Deux Mondes, Avenue de l'Opera.

Amelia's mind was made up at once.

"Strike while the iron's hot," she cried. "This sudden illness, coming at the end of their honeymoon, and involving ten days' more stay at an expensive hotel, will probably upset the curate's budget. He'll be glad to sell now. You'll get them for three hundred. It was absurd of Charles to offer so much at first; but offered once, of course we must stick to it."

"What do you propose to do?" Charles asked. "Write, or telegraph?"

"Oh, how silly men are!" Amelia cried. "Is this the sort of business to be arranged by letter, still less by telegram? No. Seymour must start off at once, taking the night train to Paris; and the moment he gets there, he must interview the curate or Mrs. Brabazon. Mrs. Brabazon's the best. She has none of this stupid, sentimental nonsense about Uncle Aubrey."

It is no part of a secretary's duties to act as a diamond broker. But when Amelia puts her foot down, she puts her foot down – a fact which she is unnecessarily fond of emphasizing in that identical proposition. So the self-same evening saw me safe in the train on my way to Paris; and next morning I turned out of my comfortable sleeping-car at the Gare de Strasbourg. My orders were to bring back those diamonds, alive or dead so to speak, in my pocket, to Lucerne; and to offer any needful sum, up to two thousand five hundred pounds, for their immediate purchase.

When I arrived at the Deux Mondes I found the poor little curate and his wife both greatly agitated. They had sat up all night, they said, with their invalid sister and the sleeplessness and suspense had certainly told upon them after their long railway journey. They were pale and tired, Mrs. Brabazon in particular looking ill and worried – too much like White Heather. I was more than half ashamed of bothering them about the diamonds at such a moment, but it occurred to me that Amelia was probably right; they would now have reached the end of the sum set apart for their Continental trip; and a little ready cash might be far from unwelcome.

I broached the subject delicately. It was a fad of lady Vandrift's, I said. She had set her heart upon those useless trinkets. And she wouldn't go without them. She must and would have them. But the curate was obdurate. He threw Uncle Aubrey still in my teeth. Three hundred? – no, never! A mother's present; impossible, dear Jessie! Jessie begged and prayed; she had grown really attached to Lady Vandrift, she said; but the curate wouldn't hear of it. I went up tentatively to four hundred. He shook his head gloomily. It wasn't a question of money, he said. It was a question of affection. I saw it was no use trying that tack any longer. I struck out a new line. "These stones," I said, "I think I ought to inform you, are really diamonds. Sir Charles is certain of it. Now, is it right for a man of your profession and position to be wearing a pair of big gems like those, worth several hundred pounds, as ordinary sleeve-links? A woman? Yes, I grant you; but for a man, is it manly? And you a cricketer!"

He looked at me and laughed. "Will nothing convince you?" he cried. "They have been examined and tested by half-a-dozen jewellers, and we know them to be paste. It wouldn't be right of me to sell them to you under false pretences, however unwilling on my side. I couldn't do it."

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"Well, then," I said, going up a bit in my bids to meet him; "I'll put it like this. These gems are paste. But Lady Vandrift has an unconquerable and unaccountable desire to possess them. Money doesn't matter to her. She is a friend of your wife's. As a personal favour, won't you sell them to her for a thousand?"

He shook his head. "It would be wrong," he said – "I might even add, criminal."

"But we take all risk," I cried.

He was absolute adamant. "As a clergyman," he answered, "I feel I cannot do it."

"Will you try, Mrs. Brabazon?" I asked.

The pretty little Scotchwoman leant over and whispered. She coaxed and cajoled him. Her ways were winsome. I couldn't hear what she said; but he seemed to give way at last. "I should love Lady Vandrift to have them," she murmured, turning to me. "She is such a dear!" And she took out the links from her husbands cuffs and handed them across to me.

"How much?" I asked.

"Two thousand?" she answered interrogatively. It was a big rise all at once; but such are the ways of women.

"Done!" I replied. "Do you consent?"

The curate looked up as if ashamed of himself.

"I consent," he said, slowly, "since Jessie wishes it. But as a clergyman, and to prevent any future misunderstanding, I should like you to give me a statement in writing that you buy them on my distinct and positive declaration that they are made of paste – old Oriental paste – not genuine stones, and that I do not claim any other qualities for them."

I popped the gems into my purse, well pleased.

"Certainly," I said, pulling out a paper. Charles, with his unerring business instinct, had anticipated the request, and given me a signed agreement to that effect.

"You will take a cheque?" I inquired.

He hesitated.

"Notes of the Bank of France would suit me better," he answered.

"Very well," I replied. "I will go out and get them."

How very unsuspecting some people are! He allowed me go off – with the stones in my pocket!

Sir Charles had given me a blank cheque, not exceeding two thousand five hundred pounds. I took it to our agents and cashed it for notes of the Bank of France. The curate clasped them with pleasure. And right glad I was to go back to Lucerne that night, feeling that I had got those diamonds into my hands for about a thousand pounds under their real value!

At Lucerne railway station Amelia met me. She was positively agitated.

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"Have you bought them, Seymour?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered, producing my spoils in triumph.

"Oh, how dreadful!" she cried, drawing back. "Do you think they're real? Are you sure he hasn't cheated you?"

"Certain of it," I replied, examining them. "No one can take me in, in the matter of diamonds. Why on earth should you doubt them?"

"Because I've been talking to Mrs. O'Hagan, at the hotel, and she says there's a well-known trick just like that – she's read of it in a book. A swindler has two sets, one real, one false; and he makes you buy the false ones by showing you the real, and pretending he sells them as a special favour."

"You needn't be alarmed," I answered. "I am a judge of diamonds."

"I shan't be satisfied," Amelia murmured, "till Charles has seen them."

We went up to the hotel. For the first time in her life I saw Amelia really nervous as I handed the stones to Charles to examine. Her doubt was contagious. I half feared, myself, he might break out into a deep monosyllabic interjection, losing his temper in haste, as he often does when things go wrong. But he looked at them with a smile, while I told him the price.

"Eight hundred pounds less than their value," he answered, well satisfied.

"You have no doubt of their reality?" I asked.

"Not the slightest," he replied, gazing at them. "They are genuine stones, precisely the same in quality and type as Amelia's necklet."

Amelia drew a sigh of relief. "I'll go upstairs," she said, slowly, "and bring down my own for you both to compare with them."

One minute later, she rushed down again, breathless. Amelia is far from slim, and I never before knew her exert herself so actively.

"Charles, Charles!" she cried, "do you know what dreadful thing has happened? Two of my own stones are gone. He's stolen a couple of diamonds from my necklet, and sold them back to me."

She held out the riviere. It was all too true. Two gems were missing – and these two just fitted the empty places!

A light broke in upon me. I clapped my hand to my head. "By Jove," I exclaimed, "the little curate is – Colonel Clay!"

Charles clapped his own hand to his brow in turn. "And Jessie," he cried, "White Heather – that innocent little Scotchwoman! I often detected a familiar ring in her voice, in spite of the charming Highland accent. Jessie is – Madame Picardet!"

We had absolutely no evidence; but, like the Commissary at Nice, we felt instinctively sure of it.

Sir Charles was determined to catch the rogue. This second deception put him on his mettle. "The worst of the man is," he said, "he has a method. He doesn't go out of his way to cheat us; he makes us go out of ours to be

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cheated. He lays a trap, and we tumble headlong into it. To-morrow, Sey, we must follow him on to Paris."

Amelia explained to him what Mrs O'Hagan had said. Charles took it all in at once, with his usual sagacity. "That explains," he said, "why the rascal used this particular trick to draw us on by. If we had suspected him, he could have shown the diamonds were real, and so escaped detection. It was a blind to draw us off from the fact of the robbery. He went to Paris to be out of the way when the discovery was made, and to get a clear day's start of us. What a consummate rogue! And to do me twice running!"

"How did he get at my jewel-case, though?" Amelia exclaimed.

"That's the question," Charles answered. "You do leave it about so!"

"And why didn't he steal the whole riviere at once, and sell the gems?" I inquired.

"Too cunning," Charles replied. "This was much better business. It isn't easy to dispose of a big thing like that. In the first place, the stones are large and valuable; in the second place, they're well known – every dealer has heard of the Vandrift riviere, and seen pictures of the shape of them. They're marked gems, so to speak. No, he played a better game – took a couple of them off, and offered them to the only one person on earth who was likely to buy them without suspicion. He came here, meaning to work this very trick; he had the links made right to the shape beforehand, and then he stole the stones and slipped them into their places. It's a wonderfully clever trick. Upon my soul, I almost admire the fellow."

For Charles is a business man himself, and can appreciate business capacity in others.

How Colonel Clay came to know about that necklet, and to appropriate two of the stones, we only discovered much later. I will not here anticipate that disclosure. One thing at a time is a good rule in life. For the moment, he succeeded in baffling us altogether.

However, we followed him on to Paris, telegraphing beforehand to the Bank of France to stop the notes. It was all in vain. They had been cashed within half an hour of my paying them. The curate and his wife, we found, quitted the Hotel des Deux Mondes for parts unknown that same afternoon. And, as usual with Colonel Clay, they vanished into space, leaving no clue behind them. In other words, they changed their disguise, no doubt, and reappeared somewhere else that night in altered characters. At any rate, no such person as the Reverend Richard Peploe Brabazon was ever afterwards heard of – and, for the matter of that, no such village exists as Empingham, Northumberland.

We communicated the matter to the Parisian police. They were most unsympathetic. "It is no doubt Colonel Clay," said the official whom we saw; "but you seem to have little just ground of complaint against him. As far as I can see, messieurs, there is not much to choose between you. You, Monsieur le Chevalier, desired to buy diamonds at the price of paste. You, madame, feared you had bought paste at the price of diamonds. You, monsieur the secretary, tried to get the stones from an unsuspecting person for half their value. He took you all in, that brave Colonel Caoutchouc – it was diamond cut diamond."

Which was true, no doubt, but by no means consoling.

We returned to the Grand Hotel. Charles was fuming with indignation. "This is really too much," he exclaimed. "What an audacious rascal! But he will never again take me in, my dear Sey. I only hope he'll try it on. I should love to catch him. I'd know him another time, I'm sure, in spite of his disguises. It's absurd my being tricked twice running like this. But never again while I live! Never again, I declare to you!"

The Episode Of The Diamond Links

"Jamais de la vie!" a courier in the hall close by murmured responsive. We stood under the veranda of the Grand Hotel, in the big glass courtyard. And I verily believe that courier was really Colonel Clay himself in one of his disguises.

But perhaps we were beginning to suspect him everywhere.