The Ripening Rubies

Max Pemberton

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"THE plain fact is," said Lady Faber, "we are entertaining thieves. It positively makes me shudder to look at my own guests, and to think that some of them are criminals."

We stood together in the conservatory of her house in Portman Square, looking down upon a brilliant ball−room, upon a glow of colour, and the radiance of unnumbered gems. She had taken me aside after the fourth waltz to tell me that her famous belt of rubies had been shorn of one of its finest pendants; and she showed me beyond possibility of dispute that the loss was no accident, but another of those amazing thefts which startled London so frequently during the season of 1893. Nor was hers the only case. Though I had been in her house but an hour, complaints from other sources had reached me. The Countess of Dunholme had lost a crescent brooch of brilliants; Mrs. Kenningham−Hardy had missed a spray of pearls and turquoise; Lady Hallingham made mention of an emerald locket which was gone, as she thought, from her necklace; though, as she confessed with a truly feminine doubt, she was not positive that her maid had given it to her. And these misfortunes, being capped by the abstraction of Lady Faber's pendant, compelled me to believe that of all the startling stories of thefts which the season had known the story of this dance would be the most remarkable.

These things and many more came to my mind as I held the mutilated belt in my hand and examined the fracture, while my hostess stood, with an angry flush upon her face, waiting for my verdict. A moment's inspection of the bauble revealed to me at once its exceeding value, and the means whereby a pendant of it had been snatched.

"If you will look closely," said I, "you will see that the gold chain here has been cut with a pair of scissors. As we don't know the name of the person who used them, we may describe them as pickpocket's scissors."

"Which means that I am entertaining a pickpocket," said she, flushing again at the thought.

"Or a person in possession of a pickpocket's implements," I suggested.

"How dreadful," she cried, "not for myself, though the rubies are very valuable, but for the others. This is the third dance during the week at which people's jewels have been stolen. When will it end?"

"The end of it will come," said I, "directly that you, and others with your power to lead, call in the police. It is very evident by this time that some person is socially engaged in a campaign of wholesale robbery. While a silly delicacy forbids us to permit our guests to be suspected or in any way watched, the person we mention may consider himself in a terrestrial paradise, which is very near the seventh heaven of delight. He will continue to rob with impunity, and to offer up his thanks for that generosity of conduct which refuses us a glimpse of his hat, or even an inspection of the boots in which he may place his plunder."

"You speak very lightly of it," she interrupted, as I still held her belt in my hands. "Do you know that my husband values the rubies in each of those pendants at eight hundred pounds?"

"I can quite believe it," said I; "some of them are white as these are, I presume; but I want you to describe it for me, and as accurately as your memory will let you."

"How will that help to its recovery?" she asked, looking at me questioningly.

"Possibly not at all," I replied; "but it might be offered for sale at my place, and I should be glad if I had the means of restoring it to you. Stranger things have happened."

"I believe," said she sharply, "you would like to find out the thief yourself."

"I should not have the smallest objection," I exclaimed frankly; "if these robberies continue, no woman in London will wear real stones; and I shall be the loser."

"I have thought of that," said she; "but, you know, you are not to make the slightest attempt to expose any guest in my house; what you do outside is no concern of mine."

"Exactly," said I, "and for the matter of that I am likely to do very little in either case; we are working against clever heads; and if my judgment be correct, there is a whole gang to cope with. But tell me about the rubies."

"Well," said she, "the stolen pendant is in the shape of a rose. The belt, as you know, was brought by Lord Faber from Burmah. Besides the ring of rubies, which each drop has, the missing star includes four yellow stones, which the natives declare are ripening rubies. It is only a superstition, of course; but the gems are full of fire, and as brilliant as diamonds."

"I know the stones well," said I; "the Burmese will sell you rubies of all colours if you will buy them, though the blue variety is nothing more than the sapphire. And how long is it since you missed the pendant?"

"Not ten minutes ago," she answered.

"Which means that your next partner might be the thief?" I suggested. "Really, a dance is becoming a capital entertainment."

"My next partner is my husband," said she, laughing for the first time, "and whatever you do, don't say a word to him. He would never forgive me for losing the rubies."

When she was gone, I, who had come to her dance solely in the hope that a word or a face there would cast light upon the amazing mystery of the season's thefts, went down again where the press was, and stood while the dancers were pursuing the dreary paths of a "square". There before me were the hundred types one sees in a London ball−room — types of character and of want of character, of age aping youth, and of youth aping age, of well−dressed women and ill−dressed women, of dandies and of the bored, of fresh girlhood and worn maturity. Mixed in the dazzling mêlée, or swaying to the rhythm of a music−hall melody, you saw the lean form of boys; the robust forms of men; the pretty figures of the girls just out; the figures, not so pretty, of the matrons, who, for the sake of the picturesque, should long ago have been in. As the picture changed quickly, and fair faces succeeded to dark faces, and the coquetting eyes of pretty women passed by with a glance to give place to the uninteresting eyes of the dancing men, I asked myself what hope would the astutest spy have of getting a clue to the mysteries in such a room; how could he look for a moment to name one man or one woman who had part or lot in the astounding robberies which were the wonder of the town? Yet I knew that if nothing were done, the sale of jewels in London would come to the lowest ebb the trade had known, and that I, personally, should suffer loss to an extent which I did not care to think about.

I have said often, in jotting down from my book a few of the most interesting cases which have come to my notice, that I am no detective, nor do I pretend to the smallest gift of foresight above my fellow men. Whenever I have busied myself about some trouble it has been from a personal motive which drove me on, or in the hope of serving someone who henceforth should serve me. And never have I brought to my aid other weapon than a certain measure of common sense. In many instances the purest good chance has given to me my only clue; the merest accident has set me straight when a hundred roads lay before me. I had come to Lady Faber's house hoping that the sight of some stranger, a chance word, or even an impulse might cast light upon the darkness in which we had walked for many weeks. Yet the longer I stayed in the ball−room the more futile did the whole thing seem. Though I knew that a nimble−fingered gentleman might be at my very elbow, that half−a−dozen others might be dancing cheerfully about me in that way of life to which their rascality had called them, I had not so much as a hand−breadth of suspicion; saw no face that was not the face of the dancing ass, or the smart man about town; did not observe a single creature who led me to hazard a question. And so profound at last was my disgust that I elbowed my way from the ball−room in despair; and went again to the conservatory where the palms waved seductively, and the flying corks of the champagne bottles made music harmonious to hear.

There were few people in this room at the moment — old General Sharard, who was never yet known to leave a refreshment table until the supper table was set; the Rev. Arthur Mellbank, the curate of St. Peter's, sipping tea; a lean youth who ate an ice with the relish of a schoolboy; and the ubiquitous Sibyl Kavanagh, who has been vulgarly described as a garrison hack. She was a woman of many partialities, whom every one saw at every dance, and then asked how she got there — a woman with sufficient personal attraction left to remind you that she was passée, and sufficient wit to make an interval tolerable. I, as a rule, had danced once with her, and then avoided both her programme and her chatter; but now that I came suddenly upon her, she cried out with a delicious pretence of artlessness, and ostentatiously made room for me at her side.

"Do get me another cup of tea," she said; "I've been talking for ten minutes to Colonel Harner, who has just come from the great thirst land, and I've caught it."

"You'll ruin your nerves," said I, as I fetched her the cup, "and you'll miss the next dance."

"I'll sit it out with you," she cried gushingly; "and as for nerves, I haven't got any; I must have shed them with

my first teeth. But I want to talk to you — you've heard the news, of course! Isn't it dreadful?"

She said this with a beautiful look of sadness, and for a moment I did not know to what she referred. Then it dawned upon my mind that she had heard of Lady Faber's loss.

"Yes," said I, "it's the profoundest mystery I have ever known."

"And can't you think of any explanation at all?" she asked, as she drank her tea at a draught. "Isn't it possible to suspect some one just to pass the time?"

"If you can suggest any one," said I, "we will begin with pleasure."

"Well, there's no one in this room to think of, is there?" she asked with her limpid laugh; "of course you couldn't search the curate's pockets, unless sermons were missing instead of rubies?"

"This is a case of 'sermons in stones,'" I replied, "and a very serious case. I wonder you have escaped with all those pretty brilliants on your sleeves."

"But I haven't escaped," she cried; "why, you're not up to date. Don't you know that I lost a marquise brooch at the Hayes's dance the other evening? I have never heard the last of it from my husband, who will not believe for a minute that I did not lose it in the crowd."

"And you yourself believe ——"

"That it was stolen, of course. I pin my brooches too well to lose them — some one took it in the same cruel way that Lady Faber's rubies have been taken. Isn't it really awful to think that at every party we go to thieves go with us? It's enough to make one emigrate to the shires."

She fell to the flippant mood again, for nothing could keep her from that; and as there was obviously nothing to be learnt from her, I listened to her chatter sufferingly.

"But we were going to suspect people," she continued suddenly, "and we have not done it. As we can't begin with the curate, let's take the slim young man opposite. Hasn't he what Sheridan calls — but there, I mustn't say it; you know — a something disinheriting countenance?"

"He eats too many jam tarts and drinks too much lemonade to be a criminal," I replied; "besides, he is not occupied, you'll have to look in the ball−room."

"I can just see the top of the men's heads," said she, craning her neck forward in the effort. "Have you noticed that when a man is dancing, either he stargazes in ecstasy, as though he were in heaven, or looks down to his boots — well, as if it were the other thing?"

"Possibly," said I; "but you're not going to constitute yourself a vehmgericht from seeing the top of people's heads."

"Indeed," she cried, "that shows how little you know; there is more character in the crown of an old man's head than is dreamt of in your philosophy, as what's−his−name says. Look at that shining roof bobbing up there, for instance; that is the halo of port and honesty — and a difficulty in dancing the polka. Oh! that mine enemy would dance the polka — especially if he were stout."

"Do you really possess an enemy?" I asked, as she fell into a vulgar burst of laughter at her own humour; but she said:

"Do I possess one? Go and discuss me with the other women — that's what I tell all my partners to do; and they come back and report to me. It's as good as a play!"

"It must be," said I, "a complete extravaganza. But your enemy has finished his exercise, and they are going to play a waltz. Shall I take you down?"

"Yes," she cried, "and don't forget to discuss me. Oh, these crushes!"

She said this as we came to the press upon the corner of the stairs leading to the ball−room, a corner where she was pushed desperately against the banisters. The vigour of the polka had sent an army of dancers to the conservatory, and for some minutes we could neither descend nor go back; but when the press was somewhat relieved, and she made an effort to progress, her dress caught in a spike of the iron−work, and the top of a panel of silk which went down one side of it was ripped open and left hanging. For a minute she did not notice the mishap; but as the torn panel of silk fell away slightly from the more substantial portion of her dress, I observed, pinned to the inner side of it, a large crescent brooch of diamonds. In the same instant she turned with indescribable quickness, and made good the damage. But her face was scarlet in the flush of its colour; and she looked at me with questioning eyes.

"What a miserable accident," she said. "I have spoilt my gown."

"Have you?" said I sympathetically, "I hope it was not my clumsiness — but really there doesn't seem much damage done. Did you tear it in front?"

There was need of very great restraint in saying this. Though I stood simply palpitating with amazement, and had to make some show of examining her gown, I knew that even an ill−judged word might undo the whole good of the amazing discovery, and deprive me of that which appeared to be one of the most astounding stories of the year. To put an end to the interview, I asked her laughingly if she would not care to see one of the maids upstairs; and she jumped at the excuse, leaving me upon the landing to watch her hurriedly mounting to the bedroom storey above.

When she was gone, I went back to the conservatory and drank a cup of tea, always the best promoter of clear thought; and for some ten minutes I turned the thing over in my mind. Who was Mrs. Sibyl Kavanagh, and why had she sewn a brooch of brilliants to the inside of a panel of her gown — sewn it in a place where it was as safely hid from sight as though buried in the Thames? A child could have given the answer — but a child would have overlooked many things which were vital to the development of the unavoidable conclusion of the discovery. The brooch that I had seen corresponded perfectly with the crescent of which Lady Dunholme was robbed — yet it was a brooch which a hundred women might have possessed; and if I had simply stepped down and told Lady Faber, "the thief you are entertaining is Mrs. Sibyl Kavanagh," a slander action with damages had trodden upon the heels of the folly. Yet I would have given a hundred pounds to have been allowed full inspection of the whole panel of the woman's dress — and I would have staked an equal sum that there had been found in it the pendant of the ripening rubies; a pendant which seemed to me the one certain clue that would end the series of jewel robberies, and the colossal mystery of the year. Now, however, the woman had gone upstairs to hide in another place whatever she had to hide; and for the time it was unlikely that a sudden searching of her dress would add to my knowledge.

A second cup of tea helped me still further on my path. It made quite clear to me the fact that the woman was the recipient of the stolen jewels, rather than the actual taker of them. She, clearly, could not use the scissors which had severed Lady Faber's pendant from the ruby belt. A skilful man had in all probability done that — but which man, or perhaps men? I had long felt that the season's robberies were the work of many hands. Chance had now marked for me one pair; but it was vastly more important to know the others. The punishment of the woman would scarce stop the widespread conspiracy; the arrest of her for the possession of a crescent brooch, hid suspiciously it is true, but a brooch of a pattern which abounded in every jeweller's shop from Kensington to Temple Bar, would have been consummate lunacy. Of course, I could have taken cab to Scotland Yard, and have told my tale; but with no other support, how far would that have availed me? If the history of the surpassingly strange case were to be written, I knew that I must write it, and lose no moment in the work.

I had now got a sufficient grip upon the whole situation to act decisively, and my first step was to re−enter the ball−room, and take a partner for the next waltz. We had made some turns before I discovered that Mrs. Kavanagh was again in the room, dancing with her usual dash, and seemingly in no way moved by the mishap. As we passed in the press, she even smiled at me, saying, "I've set full sail again;" and her whole bearing convinced me of her belief that I had seen nothing.

At the end of my dance my own partner, a pretty little girl in pink, left me with the remark, "You're awfully stupid to−night! I ask you if you've seen Manon Lescaut, and the only thing you say is, 'The panel buttons up, I thought so.'" This convinced me that it was dangerous to dance again, and I waited in the room only until the supper was ready, and Mrs. Kavanagh passed me, making for the dining−room, on the arm of General Sharard. I had loitered to see what jewels she wore upon her dress; and when I had made a note of them, I slipped from the front door of the house unobserved, and took a hansom to my place in Bond Street.

At the second ring of the bell my watchman opened the door to me; and while he stood staring with profound surprise, I walked straight to one of the jewel cases in which our cheaper jewels are kept, and took therefrom a spray of diamonds, and hooked it to the inside of my coat. Then I sent the man up stairs to awaken Abel, and in five minutes my servant was with me, though he wore only his trousers and his shirt.

"Abel," said I, "there's good news for you. I'm on the path of the gang we're wanting."

"Good God, sir!" cried he, "you don't mean that!"

"Yes," said I, "there's a woman named Sibyl Kavanagh in it to begin with, and she's helped herself to a couple of diamond sprays, and a pendant of rubies at Lady Faber's to−night. One of the sprays I know she's got; if I could

trace the pendant to her, the case would begin to look complete."

"Whew!" he ejaculated, brightening up at the prospect of business. "I knew there was a woman in it all along — but this one, why, she's a regular flier, ain't she, sir?"

"We'll find out her history presently. I'm going straight back to Portman Square now. Follow me in a hansom, and when you get to the house, wait inside my brougham until I come. But before you do that, run round to Marlborough Street police−station and ask them if we can have ten or a dozen men ready to mark a house in Bayswater some time between this and six o'clock to−morrow morning."

"You're going to follow her home then?"

"Exactly, and if my wits can find a way I'm going to be her guest for ten minutes after she quits Lady Faber's. They're sure to let you have the men either at Marlborough Street or at the Harrow Road station. This business has been a disgrace to them quite long enough."

"That's so, sir; King told me yesterday that he'd bury his head in the sand if something didn't turn up soon. You haven't given me the exact address though."

"Because I haven't got it. I only know that the woman lives somewhere near St. Stephen's Church — she sits under, or on, one of the curates there. If you can get her address from her coachman, do so. But go and dress and be in Portman Square at the earliest possible moment."

It was now very near one o'clock, indeed the hour struck as I passed the chapel in Orchard Street; and when I came into the square I found my own coachman waiting with the brougham at the corner by Baker Street. I told him, before I entered the house, to expect Abel; and not by any chance to draw up at Lady Faber's. Then I made my way quietly to the ball−room and observed Mrs. Kavanagh — I will not say dancing, but hurling herself through the last figure of the lancers. It was evident that she did not intend to quit yet awhile; and I left her to get some supper, choosing a seat near to the door of the dining−room, so that any one passing must be seen by me. To my surprise, I had not been in the room ten minutes when she suddenly appeared in the hall, unattended, and her cloak wrapped round her; but she passed without perceiving me; and I, waiting until I heard the hall door close, went out instantly and got my wraps. Many of the guests had left already, but a few carriages and cabs were in the square, and a linkman seemed busy in the distribution of unlimited potations. It occurred to me that if Abel had not got the woman's address, this man might give it to me, and I put the plain question to him.

"That lady who just left;" said I, "did she have a carriage or a cab?"

"Oh, you mean Mrs. Kevenner," he answered thickly, "she's a keb, she is, allus takes a hansom, sir; 192, Westbourne Park; I don't want to ask when I see her, sir."

"Thank you," said I, "she has dropped a piece of jewellery in the hall, and I thought I would drive round and return it to her."

He looked surprised, at the notion, perhaps, of any one returning anything found in a London ball−room; but I left him with his astonishment and entered my carriage. There I found Abel crouching down under the front seat, and he met me with a piteous plea that the woman had no coachman, and that he had failed to obtain her address.

"Never mind that," said I, as we drove off sharply, "what did they say at the station?"

"They wanted to bring a force of police round, and arrest every one in the house, sir. I had trouble enough to hold them in, I'm sure. But I said that we'd sit down and watch if they made any fuss, and then they gave in. It's agreed now that a dozen men will be at the Harrow Road station at your call till morning. They've a wonderful confidence in you, sir."

"It's a pity they haven't more confidence in themselves — but anyway, we are in luck. The woman's address is 192, Westbourne Park, and I seem to remember that it is a square."

"I'm sure of it," said he; "it's a round square in the shape of an oblong, and one hundred and ninety two is at the side near Durham something or other; we can watch it easily from the palings."

After this, ten minutes' drive brought us to the place, and I found it as he had said, the 'square' being really a triangle. Number one hundred and ninety−two was a big house, its outer points gone much to decay, but lighted on its second and third floors; though so far as I could see, for the blinds of the drawing−room were up, no one was moving. This did not deter me, however, and, taking my stand with Abel at the corner where two great trees gave us perfect shelter, we waited silently for many minutes, to the astonishment of the constable upon the beat, with whom I soon settled; and to his satisfaction.

"Ah," said he, "I knew they was rum 'uns all along; they owe fourteen pounds for milk, and their butcher ain't

paid; young men going in all night, too — why, there's one of them there now."

I looked through the trees at his word, and saw that he was right. A youth in an opera hat and a black coat was upon the doorstep of the house; and as the light of a street lamp fell upon his face, I recognized him. He was the boy who had eaten of the jam−tarts so plentifully at Lady Faber's — the youth with whom Sibyl Kavanagh had pretended to have no acquaintance when she talked to me in the conservatory. And at the sight of him, I knew that the moment had come.

"Abel," I said, "it's time you went. Tell the men to bring a short ladder with them. They'll have to come in by the balcony — but only when I make a sign. The signal will be the cracking of the glass of that lamp you can see upon the table there. Did you bring my pistol?"

"Would I forget that?" he asked; "I brought you two, and look out! for you may want them."

"I know that," said I, "but I depend upon you. Get back at the earliest possible moment, and don't act until I give the signal. It will mean that the clue is complete."

He nodded his head, and disappeared quickly in the direction where the carriage was; but I went straight up to the house, and knocked loudly upon the door. To my surprise, it was opened at once by a thick−set man in livery, who did not appear at all astonished to see me.

"They're upstairs, sir, will you go up?" said he.

"Certainly," said I, taking him at his word. "Lead the way."

This request made him hesitate.

"I beg your pardon," said he, "I think I have made a mistake — I'll speak to Mrs. Kavanagh."

Before I could answer he had run up the stairs nimbly; but I was quick after him; and when I came upon the landing, I could see into the front drawing−room, where there sat the woman herself, a small and oldish man with long black whiskers, and the youth who had just come into the room. But the back room which gave off from the other with folding−doors, was empty; and there was no light in it. All this I perceived in a momentary glance, for no sooner had the serving−man spoken to the woman, than she pushed the youth out upon the balcony, and came hurriedly to the landing, closing the door behind her.

"Why, Mr. Sutton," she cried, when she saw me, "this is a surprise; I was just going to bed."

"I was afraid you would have been already gone," said I with the simplest smile possible, "but I found a diamond spray in Lady Faber's hall — just after you had left. The footman said it must be yours, and as I am going out of town to−morrow, I thought I would risk leaving it to−night."

I handed to her as I spoke the spray of diamonds I had taken from my own show−case in Bond Street; but while she examined it she shot up at me a quick searching glance from her bright eyes, and her thick sensual lips were closed hard upon each other. Yet, in the next instant, she laughed again, and handed me back the jewel.

"I'm indeed very grateful to you," she exclaimed, "but I've just put my spray in its case; you want to give me someone else's property."

"Then it isn't yours?" said I, affecting disappointment. "I'm really very sorry for having troubled you."

"It is I that should be sorry for having brought you here," she cried. "Won't you have a brandy and seltzer or something before you go?"

"Nothing whatever, thanks," said I. "Let me apologize again for having disturbed you — and wish you 'Good−night.'"

She held out her hand to me, seemingly much reassured; and as I began to descend the stairs, she re−entered the drawing−room for the purpose, I did not doubt, of getting the man off the balcony. The substantial lackey was then waiting in the hall to open the door for me; but I went down very slowly, for in truth the whole of my plan appeared to have failed; and at that moment I was without the veriest rag of an idea. My object in coming to the house had been to trace, and if possible to lay hands upon the woman's associates, taking her, as I hoped, somewhat by surprise; yet though I had made my chain more complete, vital links were missing; and I stood no nearer to the forging of them. That which I had to ask myself, and to answer in the space of ten seconds, was the question, "Now, or to−morrow?" — whether I should leave the house without effort, and wait until the gang betrayed itself again; or make some bold stroke which would end the matter there and then. The latter course was the one I chose. The morrow, said I, may find these people in Paris or in Belgium; there never may be such a clue again as that of the ruby pendant — there never may be a similar opportunity of taking at least three of those for whom we had so long hunted. And with this thought a whole plan of action suddenly leaped up in my mind; and I

acted upon it, silently and swiftly, and with a readiness which to this day I wonder at.

I now stood at the hall−door, which the lackey held open. One searching look at the man convinced me that my design was a sound one. He was obtuse, patronizing — but probably honest. As we faced each other I suddenly took the door−handle from him, and banged the door loudly, remaining in the hall. Then I clapped my pistol to his head (though for this offence I surmize that a judge might have given me a month), and I whispered fiercely to him:

"This house is surrounded by police; if you say a word I'll give you seven years as an accomplice of the woman upstairs, whom we are going to arrest. When she calls out, answer that I'm gone, and then come back to me for instructions. If you do as I tell you, you shall not be charged — otherwise, you go to jail."

At this speech the poor wretch paled before me, and shook so that I could feel the tremor all down the arm of his which I held.

"I — I won't speak, sir," he gasped. "I won't, I do assure you — to think as I should have served such folk."

"Then hide me, and be quick about it — in this room here, it seems dark. Now run upstairs and say I'm gone."

I had stepped into a little breakfast−room at the back of the dining−room, and there had gone unhesitatingly under a round table. The place was absolutely dark, and was a vantage ground, since I could see therefrom the whole of the staircase; but before the footman could mount the stairs, the woman came half−way down them, and, looking over the hall, she asked him:

"Is that gentleman gone?"

"Just left, mum," he replied.

"Then go to bed, and never let me see you admit a stranger like that again."

She went up again at this, and he turned to me, asking:

"What shall I do now, sir? I'll do anything if you'll speak for me, sir; I've got twenty years' kerecter from Lord Walley; to think as she's a bad 'un — it's hardly creditable."

"I shall speak for you," said I, "if you do exactly what I tell you. Are any more men expected now?"

"Yes, there's two more; the capting and the clergymin, pretty clergymin he must be, too."

"Never mind that; wait and let them in. Then go upstairs and turn the light out on the staircase as if by accident. After that you can go to bed."

"Did you say the police was 'ere?" he asked in his hoarse whisper; and I said:

"Yes, they're everywhere, on the roof, and in the street, and on the balcony. If there's the least resistance, the house will swarm with them."

What he would have said to this I cannot tell, for at that moment there was another knock upon the front door, and he opened it instantly. Two men, one in clerical dress, and one, a very powerful man, in a Newmarket coat, went quickly upstairs, and the butler followed them. A moment later the gas went out on the stairs; and there was no sound but the echo of the talk in the front drawing−room.

The critical moment in my night's work had now come. Taking off my boots, and putting my revolver at the half−cock, I crawled up the stairs with the step of a cat, and entered the back drawing−room. One of the folding doors of this was ajar, so that a false step would probably have cost me my life — and I could not possibly tell if the police were really in the street, or only upon their way. But it was my good luck that the men talked loudly, and seemed actually to be disputing. The first thing I observed on looking through the open door was that the woman had left the four to themselves. Three of them stood about the table whereon the lamp was; the dumpy man with the black whiskers sat in his arm−chair. But the most pleasing sight of all was that of a large piece of cotton−wool spread upon the table and almost covered with brooches, lockets, and sprays of diamonds; and to my infinite satisfaction I saw Lady Faber's pendant of rubies lying conspicuous even amongst the wealth of jewels which the light showed.

There then was the clue; but how was it to be used? It came to me suddenly that four consummate rogues such as these would not be unarmed. Did I step into the room, they might shoot me at the first sound; and if the police had not come, there would be the end of it. Had opportunity been permitted to me, I would, undoubtedly, have waited five or ten minutes to assure myself that Abel was in the street without. But this was not to be. Even as I debated the point, a candle's light shone upon the staircase; and in another moment Mrs. Kavanagh herself stood in the doorway watching me. For one instant she stood, but it served my purpose; and as a scream rose upon her lips, and I felt my heart thudding against my ribs, I threw open the folding doors, and deliberately shot down the

glass of the lamp which had cast the aureola of light upon the stolen jewels.

As the glass flew, for my reputation as a pistol shot was not belied in this critical moment, Mrs. Kavanagh ran in a wild fit of hysterical screaming to her bedroom above — but the four men turned with loud cries to the door where they had seen me; and as I saw them coming, I prayed that Abel might be there. This thought need not have occurred to me. Scarce had the men taken two steps when the glass of the balcony windows was burst in with a crash, and the whole room seemed to fill with police.

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I cannot now remember precisely the sentences which were passed upon the great gang (known to police history as the Westbourne Park gang) of jewel thieves; but the history of that case is curious enough to be worthy of mention. The husband of the woman Kavanagh — he of the black whiskers — was a man of the name of Whyte, formerly a manager in the house of James Thorndike, the Universal Provider near the Tottenham Court Road. Whyte's business had been to provide all things needful for dances; and, though it astonishes me to write it, he had even found dancing men for ladies whose range of acquaintance was narrow. In the course of business, he set up for himself eventually; and as he worked, the bright idea came to him, why not find as guests men who may snap up, in the heat and the security of the dance, such unconsidered trifles as sprays, pendants, and lockets. To this end he married, and his wife being a clever woman who fell in with his idea, she — under the name of Kavanagh — made the acquaintance of a number of youths whose business it was to dance; and eventually wormed herself into many good houses. The trial brought to light the extraordinary fact that no less than twenty−three men and eight women were bound in this amazing conspiracy, and that Kavanagh acted as the buyer of the property they stole, giving them a third of the profits, and swindling them outrageously. He, I believe, is now taking the air at Portland; and the other young men are finding in the exemplary exercise of picking oakum, work for idle hands to do.

As for Mrs. Kavanagh, she was dramatic to the end of it; and, as I learnt from King, she insisted on being arrested in bed.